

## **The Long Road Home** by **carrymehome**

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**Summary:** I'm just killing time until Season 3 imagining how that year will go because I love these characters and it makes me sad to be without them. Amending this summary one last time now that this story knows what it wants to be when it grows up. Post Season 2, lots of fluff, a bit of plot, primarily a Hopper & Eleven, Mile/Eleven story, but damn near everyone's in it.

# 1. Chapter 1

Hopper drove aimlessly following his meeting with Dr Owens not really knowing what to think and not wanting to return to the cabin until he had his thoughts together. On the one hand, with a single piece of paper, Dr Owens had secured for El (Jane? He'd have to ask her preference) the chance of a normal childhood. Well, relatively normal anyway. She wasn't genuinely capable of true normalcy. On the other hand, before she could actually start living that childhood, she'd have to wait another year. Well, shit. He punched the steering wheel in frustration.

He didn't know how he was going to get her to agree to another year of the Don't Be Stupid rules seeing as how her willingness to play along was already exhausted. When Hopper was a kid, your parents spent years making sure you knew you weren't going to get away with jack shit so that you didn't try to get away with anything once you were a teenager and your parents could no longer stop you.

Hopper hadn't been the most well behaved kid, but at least he wasn't openly defiant. Sure he skipped school and smoked and drank as a teenager, but he'd had the decency to at least hide it from his parents. It never would have occurred to Hopper at 13 years old to throw a book at his dad's head, shove a plate of food into his lap or run away. Whether his dad would have done it or not, kids of his generation had a healthy fear that that sort of thing would result in not being able to sit comfortably for a week so they didn't dare test the boundaries.

Meanwhile Hopper's one attempt to ground El a few weeks ago (had it only been a few weeks? Averting an apocalypse had a way of messing with your judgment of time) ended in complete disaster and the only thing both of them learned from the experience was that El could and would call his bluff and he would lose.

Whether it was possible to control any 13 year old who was completely unwilling to even humor a parent's claim to authority, Hopper had become convinced it was definitely impossible with a psychic 13 year old who could easily knock him on his ass with a flick of her head. His inherent disdain for the Free to Be You and Me

generation of parents who needed to cajole their children into compliance was coming to bite in the ass because that's exactly who he needed to be. Karma is a real bitch sometimes.

He scrubbed out the end of his cigarette into the Blazer's well used ashtray when it dawned on him. He couldn't control Eleven, but there was at least one person he knew who'd been brought up with a healthy respect for adult authority. He smiled to himself and set off in the direction of the Wheeler residence.

Karen Wheeler was just picking up her kitchen from the onslaught of after school snacking when the doorbell rang. She found a gruff and annoyed looking Jim Hopper on her front porch. "Karen." He said flatly.

She stepped aside to invite him in, "Jim." An uncomfortable moment passed before Karen Wheeler asked "Is everything alright?"

Hawkins wasn't a particularly taxing law enforcement job, Hawkins Lab and related activities notwithstanding, but Hopper was good enough at his job to understand the fine art of exploiting awkward silences. Even after leaving Karen to break the silence, he carefully examined his hat that he'd removed as he crossed the threshold, rocked on his feet and took a slow breath before he started talking.

"Well, Karen, I've had reports of some kids matching your boy and his friends' descriptions getting into a bit of mischief. Nothing serious. Boys will be boys sorts of stuff. The worst I could hang on them at this point is a trespassing ticket, but with the vandalism out at the pumpkin patches back in October, I think people are a bit sensitive." Karen Wheeler's hand was clutching the collar of her blouse and she looked ill at the idea of one of her children being in any sort of real trouble. Perfect.

"But," Hopper continued, throwing her a bone, "I've known your family a long time and I think your boy is a good kid. So if you don't mind, I'd like to have a little chat with him. You know, just to let him know I'm keeping an eye on him and we can nip this thing in the bud without it having to be anything...official. Bright kid like that doesn't need any sort of a paper trail if you know what I mean."

Karen Wheeler most assuredly did know what he meant and as she yelled for him to come up from the basement, Hopper knew he had just secured himself access Michael Wheeler whenever he needed without relying on a web of fictitious sleepovers for an alibi.

"C'mon kid, we're taking a drive."

"Dinner is at 6:30!" Karen called after them. Hopper gave her a wave of acknowledgement without turning around as he steered Mike towards the Blazer by the shoulder. The moment they had the privacy of the Chief's vehicle, Mike let loose, "Where's El? Is she ok? She isn't answering the radio. You aren't going to keep her away from us again, are you? You can't, there's a better way to keep her safe, I know there is. We've kept the Upside Down a secret for over a year, it's not like we can't be trusted with knowing where El is. I found her first and we kept her safe from the bad men before you ever..."

"Kid, KID! Slow down before you hurt yourself. She's fine, she's in a secure location and no, I'm not going to keep her cut off from you and your friends SO LONG AS we can all agree to follow a few, simple rules. Do we have a deal?"

"You haven't said what these rules are."

Hopper took the opportunity of a stop sign to light a cigarette. "No, I haven't and you're not in a position to negotiate. This is a take it or leave it deal, so are you gonna take it or leave it?" He pointedly did not move through the intersection making it very clear that Mike could accept his terms sight unseen or Hopper would not take him to see El.

"Fine. Take it. Can we go, please?"

Hopper picked up his police radio, dialed it to channel 7 and tapped out a message while Mike stared at him impatiently. -. - - - - . . -. -  
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"Ok, now we can go," and he drove on heading towards the outskirts of town. The two sat in silence for a good portion of the ride before Mike spoke.

"How long did it take her to recover...after the gate?"

"She slept almost two days straight and then she'd wear out real easy. Been back to normal for about a week."

"But you're not letting her answer the radio."

"No. Not until I was able to find out how hard anyone's looking for her."

"Are they looking?"

"Not specifically. The lab was some kind government black ops sort of shit. Probably CIA but we'll never really know. They've got an ear to the ground to monitor, but they're not exactly looking for Eleven since their records say that she was killed closing the gate. They'd sure as hell notice her if we aren't careful though, so we have to lay low."

"How long?"

"Another year."

"A YEAR! But that's not fair! She can't stay hidden for another year! She deserves to actually have a life!"

"Hey! Calm down, alright? It's not gonna be like before, ok? Look, El...well, she takes risks that she doesn't see as risks because she's impatient. I figure if she doesn't have to take off to go see you, she'll be more content to not take off. So I'll be bringing you out here to visit, but like I said, there will be rules. If you can't follow the rules, then the visits stop. Are we clear?"

"Yeah, we're clear. What rules?"

"Number one, you don't come out here unless I bring you. I don't need you being followed. Number two, stop talking to her over the damn radio, anyone can scan the channels and listen to you. We can work out a code and you can get a sign of life, but no conversations. Number three, I don't care if Eleven wants to break the rules, you don't. And you'd better not go along with her doing it either. Got all that?"

"Yeah, I got it," Mike said sullenly.

"Ok, we're here but I need you to wait in the car for a bit." One gruff look from Hopper and Mike's protest died before fully escaping his lips. See? Hopper thought, this is how kids are supposed to act. "I have to explain some things to Eleven alone and then you can come in. Just sit in the car and don't draw any attention to yourself until I come for you."

The Chief walked the remaining distance through the woods towards a ramshackle cabin taking care to step over the trip wire he'd set. He knocked twice, once, three times. Depending on her mood, it could take El mere seconds or several minutes to open the locks and if she was particularly pissed off at him, she might not come out of hiding once Hopper came inside the cabin. That afternoon, however, she was eagerly awaiting his return because not only did the locks fly open the second he finished the last knock, she was standing in the doorway expectantly.

"Well?"

He chuckled and ruffled her curly hair before turning to close and lock the door.

"Well?" She asked again, becoming exasperated with the older man.

Hopper took a deep breath before sitting on the sofa and indicating for El to sit in the chair adjacent to him. "I met with Dr Owens, you remember him, right? Guy we found bleeding on the stairs, needed a tourniquet, white hair..."

"What. Happened." El demanded now, not at all amused by Hopper stalling.

"Ok, kid, bottom line. He fixed the paperwork so that every report from the lab shows you died closing the gate that night. The bad men aren't trying to find you, but they are still keeping tabs on Hawkins to make sure they covered their trail. So we still have to be careful but we can be a little bit stupid. Just a little bit though, nothing crazy, understand?"

"How stupid?" El eyed him suspiciously.

"Same rules. Curtains drawn, don't answer the door unless you hear my knock, don't go outside without me," here El narrowed her eyes in anger and Hopper held up his hand in self defense, "hold on, kid, hear me out. Those are your rules." The emphasis on your made El wonder who else had rules. "Wheeler's rules are that he can't come out here without me, he can only radio you in code and if you decide to break the rules, he can't go along with it or I'll have his ass."

El sat in stunned silence processing everything she'd just heard. Mike couldn't come to the cabin without Hopper...but that meant he could come to the cabin if Hopper brought him. And they could radio if they used code. She could see Mike. She could radio Mike. She wouldn't be alone.

"Mike is..." Eleven faltered looking for the words to confirm she had understood what Hopper had said "...just a little bit stupid?"

Hopper tried desperately (and failed) to disguise his laughter as coughing because he, as a general rule, at least attempted to not make Eleven feel self conscious about her lack of language. "Yeah kid, seeing Mike IF YOU FOLLOW THE RULES is only a little stupid."

"Half-way happy," Eleven announced.

"Compromise," Hopper confirmed.

"How long is soon?" Eleven asked and Hopper's temporary relief faded. This was going to go poorly.

"Another year," he confessed.

To his surprise, nothing broke or flew across the room, the lights didn't flicker, Eleven just looked a little sad and resigned. "Oh yeah," he said absently, "one other thing. Wheeler's waiting out in the car."

Eleven bolted for the door so fast she upended the chair she was sitting in but she skidded to a stop at the door remembering the rules. "Outside?" she asked.

"Yeah go on, let him know he's ok to come in."

Eleven ran to the Blazer and threw open the door "Mike!" she yelled breathlessly.

Mike had been told to stay in the vehicle until Hopper came for him and he didn't want to mess up on the first day. Hopper had followed Eleven to the Blazer and when Mike caught his eye, the Chief nodded.

Everyone was behaving and Hopper mentally congratulated himself for orchestrating the new arrangement.

Mike was updating El in rapid fire word vomit that she probably couldn't absorb. Not that it mattered because she was clearly so thrilled to be reunited, it didn't seem to matter what that boy said. And that's when a new sense of impending doom descended on Jim Hopper. He had just arranged for his love sick 13 year old daughter (God that sounded weird even in his own head) to hang out with the 13 year old boy who was the object of her affection. Shit.

El excitedly showed Mike the cabin ("Home!") and was heading in to show him her room when Hopper yelled after them "Door stays open."

El looked back, spoiling for a fight. "You said three rules. Three. Not four."

"Those were the three Don't Be Stupid Rules, not the I'm Letting You Have A Boy Over Rules. Door stays open."

They stared each other down in a game of chicken that made Mike extremely nervous. "I have to leave here to take him home in," Hopper paused to consult his wrist, "an hour. Do you really want to spend your time arguing?"

El gave him a disgruntled growl. "Fine. Door stays open." And she stomped off.

Hopper put his hand in his pocket to remind himself of the presence of the new Birth Certificate. That information would keep for another day, he decided. She had enough to process for now and he had reports to write.



## 2. Chapter 2

A/N

*Thanks to all who have reviewed and even those who have only read. I write to satisfy my own curiosity, but I'm happy others are entertained. In answer to some questions, my goal is to cover the whole year. I have some basic ideas mapped out in a month to month fashion, but it's definitely an evolving thing. Updates are likely to be short and quick or long and slow (TWSS) depending on just how much I feel like avoiding work at that particular moment.*

*Today I am playing with the Mike vs Hopper relationship because I enjoy how the show balances the adult/child dynamic. The kids on their own have sort of a Goonies vibe that is absolutely appropriate for 13, 17 and 18 year olds on an epic adventure. Hopper and Joyce prefer to function as adults (Hopper's annoyance at the D&D references in the Mind Flayer episode), but when push comes to shove, they are forced by circumstances to interact with the children as peers (Hopper is ready to arm any of the children because there's a demodog coming and a second gun available, for example).*

*The perpetual problem of juvenile lit is how do you put juveniles into situations that are interesting without coming up with some believable reason for all of the adults in their lives to be so negligent as to allow it. (Which is why so many children's stories involve orphans and boarding schools.) Here the Duffers have tapped into a different explanation: necessity. But when the danger passes and the necessity is gone, the adults naturally want to go back to adults being adults and kids being kids even though those lines have been muddled. Something would need to happen to force a shift in the balance of power. In this case, it's Hopper taking this piss out of Mike. Because he can, because I'm convinced that he would and because I think it's amusing.*

*So here you are, post Thanksgiving, pre Christmas break...*

Mike Wheeler never realized it was possible to simultaneously revere and hate a single person at the same time before Chief Hopper unilaterally appointed himself El's gatekeeper. It was not necessary to convince Mike's parents that Mike was on the verge of juvenile

delinquency just to give them a viable explanation for Mike regularly disappearing with the Chief. He could just as easily have said Mike had been awarded an internship or something that made him look good, but no. Mike couldn't help but believe Hopper had done it to screw with him.

After Hopper had brought Mike out to see El for the first time, he stopped by the house to give Mike's parents a status report on the bud nipping. The problem, according to Hopper's made-up alternate universe in which he was taking up an interest in Mike in order to keep him out of trouble, was that these boys just didn't have enough to keep them busy. Idle hands, you know. And all the adults had chuckled and nodded their heads like that wasn't utter bullshit. If it was alright with the Wheelers, Hopper would like to give Mike something constructive to do in his free time and Mike's eyes rolled so far back in his head, he briefly wondered whether they might stick that way.

Now his previously oblivious parents were suddenly watchful and attentive any time Mike wasn't with Hopper. Mike was certain the man both knew that was going to happen and enjoyed Mike's predicament. Because Hopper was a sadistic asshole.

And yet, at the same time, Hopper had kept his word. They were able to communicate by radio...sort of.

"Your code," he explained to them both, "is not for conversation. Conversations can be intercepted. It's for checking in, got it?" And two dark curly heads bobbed in response. Christ, he notice, they have almost matching hair.

The code was deeply unsatisfying. Marco. Polo. That was it. And there was so much more to be said.

Marco. *I had a crappy day at school today. I wish you could be there with me.*

Polo. *Hopper is late. Again. I'm lonely.*

Marco. *I can't figure out this stupid workbook. I hate it. I will never be ready for school.*

Polo. *I'm going to strangle my stupid sister.*

But at least it was a sign of life, as promised. Once or twice a week, he took Mike out to see Eleven. Sometimes just for an hour after school, sometimes for an entire Saturday. Sometimes he'd stop to pick up the other members of The Party, sometimes it was just Mike. Because Hopper was the greatest.

Sometimes they worked at the small kitchen table doing homework or puzzles. Hopper sat on the sofa a few feet away with his back to them, a clipboard of paperwork balanced on his knee, appearing to ignore them but actually listening to every word because Hopper was a controlling dick.

Those were the times they would held hands under the table. They talked about innocuous things like school. El was very curious how school worked.

Sometimes, El wheeled the TV into her room ("Door stays open," came the gruff reminder each time) and they left it on but didn't watch. It was easier to have conversations that Hopper couldn't overhear with background noise. "Privacy," El whispered conspiratorially and Mike grinned. Hopper knew they were evading his supervision, but he let it slide because Hopper was actually a pretty cool guy.

Those were the times when they whispered about personal things. El had nightmares that Papa would come back. Mike had nightmares that the Mind Flayer would come back. El was afraid she was never going to get to go to school because she wasn't learning fast enough. Mike was afraid she was never going to get to school because Hopper wasn't actually going to let her. It was nice to have someone you could admit your fears to who wouldn't tease or overreact.

They were sitting next to each other on the floor of El's room, resting their backs against the bed, hands interlaced, not watching The A-Team which was plenty loud enough to cover a conversation.

"Remember before," Mike started, "at the school when I told you about the Snow Ball."

El nodded with wide eyes.

"Do you think he'd let you go? It would be at the school and only other kids would be there."

"Just a little bit stupid," El mused.

"What? Oh yeah, I guess it's kinda dumb."

"No," El laughed and tried to think of how to explain. "The rules. The Don't Be Stupid Rules. This time he says we can be a little bit stupid because they think I'm dead."

"Oh, ok," Mike was relieved.

"So maybe the Snow Ball is only a little bit stupid," El finished hopefully.

The ride home that day was extremely nerve wracking for Mike. Hopper could tell and he did nothing to break the tension. Mike should be nervous. A fearless Mike was a co-conspirator waiting to happen.

He waited until they were only a few minutes from his house so if it went poorly, at least he wasn't trapped in Hopper's car for long.

"Could El come to the school dance?" Mike blurted out before he lost his nerve. Hopper just raised an eyebrow in response. "It's the last Middle School dance and she's never gotten to do anything and it's only just kids so it shouldn't be risky. And Nancy and Jonathon will both be there," he threw in as an afterthought thinking maybe the four additional years the older teens had might make them the rough equivalent to at least one trusted adult.

Hopper said nothing because he was an over protective bully and Mike didn't know how to argue with someone who just sat silently, letting his displeasure be felt as though he couldn't even bothered to express it. Hopper pulled into the Wheeler driveway, put the Blazer in park and turned to face Mike. Mike, to be perfectly honest, was terrified. "It's already been arranged," he said and smiled. "Go on, now," he said dismissing Mike from the car.

Mike was walking on air. Hopper was amazing.

### 3. Chapter 3

*A/N One of my favorite things about ST is the strong female characters. While I understand the jealousy Eleven felt seeing Mike and Max together, she can't hold that grudge forever because being pissed off at the only other female peer over perceived boyfriend stealing is below Eleven.*

*Immediately following the Snow Ball...*

The Snow Ball had been wonderful, perfect, amazing, better than Eleven had even expected. And then everyone had to go home until the only ones left were Eleven and Hopper and *that girl*. Max's ride hadn't shown up so Hopper agreed to be a responsible adult and wait with her, apparently oblivious to Eleven's distaste for the other girl.

"I could just give you a ride," he suggested.

"I'd better wait a little longer," she responded and what she didn't say was that if she was gone by the time her step-brother got there, he'd find some way to get her back. Whatever gains on Billy she'd made that night at the Byers' house faded the moment she was no longer armed. Life had returned to business as usual and it sucked.

"All right," he sighed and lit a cigarette leaning back against the Blazer. Despite not having seen anything unusual all night, sitting still was making Hopper antsy. "Why don't you girls wait in the car. No sense standing out here in the open."

Had he not been scanning the tree line surrounding Hawkins Middle School for movement, he might have seen the death glare El gave him in response to that suggestion. Max absolutely saw it and seeing as how she already had one person in her life who irrationally hated her, she was equally displeased by the Chief's suggestion.

"You don't have to wait, really."

"I'm certainly not going to leave a kid potentially stranded at nine o'clock at night. We'll give it a few more minutes and then I'll take you, alright? In the meantime, climb on in," he held the door and looked pointedly at Eleven. They'd reached the limits of a little bit

stupid.

Eleven slid over into the drivers seat putting as much room as possible between her and Max. The two girls sat in icy silence for what seemed like forever before El reached for Hopper's radio, dialed in the designated channel of the day and tapped out "Marco." Nothing. Where was Mike?

"Where'd you learn Morse Code?" Max desperately tried to break the silence.

"Hopper," El answered flatly.

Another silence.

"So what were you tapping out?" She tried again to engage.

"Code," said the Master of One Word Sentences.

"What kind of code?" Max was starting to get annoyed.

"Secret code."

Max paused considering whether to just give up and go back to letting El ignore her for no good reason. And then she decided she was tired of pretending things were fine when they weren't and she was going to whack the proverbial hornet's nest instead.

"Is there an actual reason you don't like me or did I just, like, win the bitch lottery or something?" Max had thrown down the gauntlet.

El briefly considered making Max pee herself in retaliation, but Hopper would be mad if she messed up his car and they'd managed to make it a whole week without a single argument. It would have been a shame to break their streak. She settled for glaring and tapping the radio again, "Marco." Nothing. Dammit, Mike, your house is close. Where are you?

"The first time you ever saw me, you were mean to me. I think it's only fair you tell me why," Max pressed.

Fair was something Eleven threw in Hopper's face on a regular basis.

Being accused of unfairness struck a bit of a nerve.

"That wasn't the first time," El replied cryptically.

Max wracked her brain trying to think when she might have seen El before she'd walked through the Byers' door and she drew a complete blank. "You're going to have to spell it out for me then because I seriously have no idea what you're talking about."

"I walked to the school one day, to see Mike," El explained. "You were in the gym too, so I couldn't see Mike."

Max skipped a beat both trying to think what day El might possibly be referring to and wrapping her brain around what she'd just said.

"I'm sorry, but that is *such* bullshit," Max spat out.

"Not bullshit," El fired back.

"Yes it is! You hate me because the day you randomly break out of your house to come try and find Mike, I just happen to be in the room? *Really?* Oh my God, you and Mike are so much alike," Max rolled her eyes and stared out the window away from El.

El stewed. And tapped "Marco." Nothing. She was getting Mike duct tape for Christmas and she was going to duct tape that damn radio to his damn arm if he didn't respond soon.

"How?" she demanded, curiosity finally getting the better of her.

"He hated me because I committed the grievous sin of not being you, that's how. You both hold stupid shit against me because you were upset about being apart," Max said. "And that's bullshit."

The girls returned to icy silence and El wondered how long Hopper's idea of a few minutes was so they could stop waiting for Max's ride.

"It's not like I asked to move here," Max added quietly. Resentfully.

El really wanted to stay mad, but her weakness for people who were victims of unfair circumstances got the better of her.



"Where was home?" El extended an olive branch.

"California," Max answered flatly.

Another silence.

"Why did you move?" Eleven tried again to engage.

"Step-dad," said the girl who was learning the art of the one word sentence.

"Your step-brother is a mouth breather," Eleven declared.

Max really wanted to stay mad, but her weakness for anyone who hated Billy as much as she did got the better of her and she laughed.

The silence got a little warmer.

"Truce?" the redhead offered her hand.

"Truce," El accepted the hand.

The radio came to life, "Marco." El grinned and explained, "Mike." before tapping back "Polo."

Outside the car, Hopper ground out the cigarette butt. He knew he was taking a risk when he called Max's parents to offer her a ride home, but he couldn't stand by and watch Eleven's stubbornness drive a wedge between the whole group. "Weirdos have to stick together," he said to himself.

"We've waited long enough," he announced opening the driver's side door and sending El scooting into the middle seat. "Time to take you home."

## 4. Chapter 4

*A/N This chapter is the result of a few things I've been chewing on. Timelines, loose ends, that sort of thing.*

*Christmas week-ish, but before the actual Christmas day.*

*Adding an additional note to respond to review by Linguo because you don't have your PM enabled so I can't send you a message and I am incapable of not responding. It's a compulsion, I'm waiting for the appropriate 12-step to hit the market but until then, I'm going to need to be humored. So I hope you find this note.*

*First of all, good spotting re the Genie case. I was not aware that the father hung himself (thank you for the info) and I was aware that she was never able to internalize grammatical structure or learn more than a few words. There is at least a valid argument that her linguistic abilities were compounded by trauma. I have wondered (but obviously not enough to delve that far into linguistics to find out) what a case study like Helen Keller brings to the discussion. There you have an individual who is in an otherwise non-traumatic environment and yet completely deprived of access to language. Keller received intervention at age 7 which is not yet outside of the critical language period, but I would be curious to know if there were other similar cases where intervention came much later and how those case studies support or contradict the critical period theory.*

*As is applies to the show, Eleven's saving grace (completely losing sight of the fact that this is fiction and her real saving grace is the decision to write a script that gives her more lines) is that she wasn't in complete isolation. There was the whole Rainbow Room sequence and Brenner does interact with her, albeit minimally and only to be a manipulative prick, but hey, language is language.*

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The first time she demanded a tree, he gestured out the window to

the forest beyond and she was not amused that he had purposefully missed her meaning. Not just a tree, a Christmas tree. He removed the decorations Flo had so kindly put in his office to make it festive and brought them home to Eleven. Two birds with one stone as far as he was concerned.

"What is a resolution?" Eleven asked staring at her first Christmas tree.

"A resolution? Like a New Years resolution?"

She nodded. The things she picked up on, he wondered to himself

"It's like you make a promise to yourself to do something. R-e-s-o-l-u-t-i-o-n. Look it up," he responded gesturing towards the dictionary.

She flipped through the pages until she found the word. "A firm decision to do or not do something," Eleven read

"That's right."

She paused and contemplated. "What something?"

"Oh well it could be anything. People like to think of a new year as a time to start over so they decide they're gonna lose weight, eat better, read more, that sort of thing. Some way to improve yourself."

"You need a resolution," she declared. "You need rules."

"I have rules," Hopper grouched back.

"No, I have rules. Mike has rules. You have no rules."

"That's because I'm not a kid," he said with a healthy dose of sarcasm

"Brat," she shot back

"Seriously?" he raised an eyebrow.

"Badly behaved, spoiled, impolite," she recites the memorized dictionary definition. It was his word of the day after all.

"Alright fine," he humored her seeing as how she was clearly not

going to drop this, "what do you think my rules should be?"

"Number one, don't be late. Or at least send the signal. Number two, no secrets."

"What secrets?" he interrupted defensively.

"When is soon, can I go to school, can I see Mama. Just tell me. Be honest. That's fair. Three, no more TV dinners. They suck."

"Tell you what, I'll get better about being on time, but sometimes I get busy with work and lose track. But I really will try. And I'll get us some cookbooks and we'll learn to cook together, ok?"

"What about no secrets?" She pressed.

"Look kid, sometimes there are just things I need to handle, ok?"

"Bullshit," there had been a lot that Eleven hadn't called Hopper out on lately, but there was no way she was going to let that fly. "I can handle the gate, I can handle the demogorgan, I can handle secrets."

"Hopper considered what it would mean to genuinely have no secrets. There was at least one he was terrified of El finding out. She would hate him and he'd lose her forever. He couldn't survive that, he was certain. He would take that secret to his grave and the only other person who knew about it had already taken it to his.

Being confronted with something extremely uncomfortable, he turned it back on Eleven. "If you really want no secrets, then I want to know what exactly happened when you took off to see your mom."

Eleven realized that she had not fully considered what a genuine no secrets rule might mean. Hopper still had no idea Eleven had been to Chicago. No idea El had found her sister Kali. No idea Brenner might be alive. She wasn't entirely sure why she wanted to keep these things to herself, but she did. She could tell Hopper more than just the fact that she'd hitched a ride to see her mother. She'd tell him the rest...eventually.

"Ok," she said jutting out her chin defiantly, "you first. Why were you really late?"

He paused, took a deep breath and then took the plunge. "I met with Dr Owens, again, that's why I was late."

"Dr Owens is a Bad Man," Eleven was clearly pissed Hopper was cooperative with anyone from the lab, Dr. Owens included.

"He's not totally a Bad Man," Hopper justified. "He's more like a morally ambiguous man."

"Am big what?" El asked, confused.

"Ambiguous. It means to be two ways at the same time. Part good, part bad. Look, I'm not saying I'm friends with the guy, but I have to check in with him to see how things are going so I know when it will be safe for you. Ok?"

"Is it safe?" She asked hopefully.

"Not yet, kid. Remember one year. It's only been two months. But he did tell me something else that was helpful. A way to help you get more caught up on school stuff."

Eleven raised her eyebrows in silent question.

"Well, see now there was a girl out in California. She's an adult now, but when she was a baby, her father decided there was something wrong with her so he locked her in a room. He wouldn't let anyone else see her and no one ever spoke to her. She wasn't found until she was about your age now and she couldn't speak a word because she hadn't heard anyone speak since she was a baby."

"Her papa was a bad man," El said darkly feeling uniquely empathetic. She moved next to Hopper on the sofa and leaned into him for comfort.

"Yeah he was kid. A very bad man who is now locked away in prison." Hopper wrapped his arm around El and kissed her head as he pulled her into a protective hug. "The thing is," he continued, "there were a lot of doctors who tried to help this little girl learn to speak. What they found out is the brain learns language one way when we're babies and another way when we're older."

"Papa didn't let anyone talk to me either," Eleven's voice was even quieter. She rarely spoke about the lab and how she'd suffered. "If I made him happy, he talked. If I made him mad, the Bad Men put me in the dark and no one came. Is that why it's hard to learn words now?"

"I think so kid. But this girl did learn to speak. Not completely normal, but she did learn. And you didn't hear a lot of words when you were little, but you at least heard some. And you were younger than this girl when you got out of there. So I think, I think maybe using some of the things that worked for this other girl would work even better for you."

"I could be ready for school?" She asked

"I don't know, ok? I really want you to be able to go to school, but I worry if you're not ready, you'll just be miserable. It's a lot of ground to cover in a short amount of time." Hopper couldn't stomach the thought of Eleven being teased for being stupid. Kids could be such assholes.

"We'll try," she conceded without confessing she shared his doubts.

They sat together on the sofa a while longer, letting Hopper's secret sink in.

"Your turn," Hopper finally said to change the mood a little. "I want to know about this adventure of yours."

"A nice man in a big truck took me to Mama," she shrugged

"Mm-hm, and when you got to your mom's what happened?"

"Aunt Becky showed me Mama."

"And...," he prompted

"Then Mama showed me what happened," El finished. Hello, this was new information.

"What do you mean 'what happened'?" He tried and failed to keep his voice even.

"Mama saw I was born and Papa took me. He told her I died but she saw. She took a gun to get me back. She found me in the room with the rainbow. Then they hurt her real bad," Eleven got more and more quiet as she spoke and by the end, she was basically whispering to Hopper's rib cage.

The information itself wasn't new, but the fact that Terry Ives somehow communicated it to Eleven was. "How did she show you?" He asked.

Eleven covered her eyes. She'd gone into the void to find Mama. Of course she did.

Eleven sniffled and burrowed into Hopper's side until she fell asleep. Secrets were exhausting.

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Hopper sat on the porch of the cabin that night, smoking and thinking. He mentally subtracted 13 from 1984. El was born sometime in 1971. What was he doing in 1971? He was a newly promoted detective for NYPD and he and Diane got married. Everything was good and the future was bright. And El was a helpless newborn in the hands of a psychopath.

Two years later, 1973. Sara was born and he and Diane just couldn't stop staring at her and how perfect she was. She had her mother's golden hair. And El was two and locked in darkness to control her. Was that the year Terry managed to find her, Hopper wondered?

Three years later, 1976. Another promotion to Lieutenant and Sara got sick. He got her into the best hospitals and did his best to comfort her through countless blood draws and treatments. And five year old Eleven who should have been in kindergarten was poked and prodded like a lab rat with no one to hold her.

One year later, 1977. A small white coffin dwarfed by the floral arrangement Diane had selected resting on top. A blue hair ribbon wrapped protectively around his wrist while his heart died to escape

the pain. And El had never seen daylight.

Three years later, 1978. He had destroyed his marriage because he'd checked out when Sara died. He fell into the abyss. The divorce was final and it was suggested to Hopper that he take a personal leave of absence to avoid anything that might mar his professional record. And El was 7, and her training began in earnest.

A year later, 1979. Hopper returned to his home town for his father's funeral. Now he was truly, completely alone, broken and broke. Hawkins needed a Chief of Police and Hopper's 11 years with the NYPD was impressive enough to make him a shoo in. Hawkins was quiet enough to hide the fact that Hopper used pain killers to kill a different kind of pain. And a few miles away eight year old Eleven was subjected to the latest break throughs in psychological torture the CIA had to offer.

What if he'd found her then? Would she have a better chance at something resembling a normal life? Could he have saved her from the guilt of having killed? Could he have gotten to her before she knew about Upside Down? Before Upside Down has known about her? If instead of drowning himself, he'd just opened his eyes, what would he have seen?

The door cracked causing Hopper to shift his focus away from the night sky.

"Outside?" she asked

"Yeah kid, of course."

"She pointed to Hopper's chest. "Sad," and it was hard to tell if it was a question or a declaration.

"A little," he admitted. "Thinking about the past."

"El? I'm sorry the Bad Men hurt you. I was right here, right outside and I didn't know. I wish I had."

"Not your fault," she said firmly.

No, he thought, but I was willing to risk you going back to save Will



Byers last year. No matter what he did to atone for it, Hopper would never truly make up for it.

"I have one more secret," he announced. She wasn't sure how many more secrets she could handle tonight. "Not a secret really, maybe more of a surprise. But we've had a long day so this is a good time."

He handed her the white envelope that had been hidden in his jacket pocket for a few weeks now. She opened it and looked confused.

"Dr. Owens did that for you. For us. It's a birth certificate. You need one to go to school, get a driver's license, that sort of thing."

"This makes you mine?" She asked.

"It makes us each other's."

## 5. Chapter 5

**A/N: Unanswered question of the day: How do you go about taking someone with no formal education and get them ready for High School with only a year's notice?**

**(And yes, I skipped Christmas.)**

**Takes place in the last week-ish of Christmas Break**

When Hopper pulled into the Wheeler driveway Saturday morning, Mike was prepared. He'd thought through his arguments and rehearsed them in the mirror. He was ready. And slightly sick to his stomach.

"You don't think he's intimidating?" he had whispered to Eleven one day with the TV covering their conversation.

"Just loud," Eleven explained, shrugging her shoulders. When Hopper yelled, she yelled right back. She didn't see why Mike had trouble with this concept. Maybe that was the difference between your adult and someone else's adult. It was hard to say given that the only other adult she spent much time around in her post-lab life was Mrs Byers and the only person Mrs Byers yelled at was Hopper.

Regardless of how nervous Mike actually was, he was just going to have to suck it up for El's sake because someone had to stand up for her on this.

"Is El really going to be able to start school with us next year?" Mike confronted Hopper before they were to the end of the street to give him the maximum amount of car ride to have this conversation.

"I'm not promising anything because I don't want El to get her hopes up and then have it not work out." *He'd learned his lesson on that front.* "If it's not safe, it's not happening and sorry, but I don't have a crystal ball."

"But if it stays quiet?" Mike pressed.

"I said one year. School starts in September and the year isn't up until

the end of November. So assuming the coast is clear, we'd be looking at second semester. But again, this all a giant IF," Hopper had progressed from normal speaking voice to annoyed voice. Mike persisted.

"Ok, fine. But IF it's clear, she'd be better off to start in September with everyone else. It's a small school, a new kid is going to be noticed no matter what, but she will be noticed a lot more if she starts in the middle of the year."

"If it's too risky to start second semester, then it's too risky to start at all," Hopper's voice had now turned into a growl.

"But..."

"Enough with the school right now!" Hopper barked in his take no shit police voice, "I'm not going to send her to school just to have the CIA or the NSA or whatever the hell agency swoop in and disappear her to some other lab in some unknown part of the country. You want that? That's right. It's something I'm gonna have to decide when the time comes. Not. Now."

For the remainder of the drive, the only thing that broke the silence of the vehicle was Hopper's police radio that would periodically come to life.

When they finally got to the cabin, Eleven looked between Mike and a more annoyed than usual Hopper and raised her eyebrows in question. Mike only shook his head in response indicating he didn't want to talk about it in front of Hopper. El sent the TV cart wheeling into her bedroom followed by the customary "Door stays open" reminder.

"What happened?" she asked as soon as their voices were sufficiently masked.

"I tried to get him to say for sure when you could start school and he got pissed at me."

"Thanks for trying," and she meant it. Even though she didn't think Mike gave Hopper enough credit, the fact that he was trying to

advocate her didn't escape her notice. She'd gone from having no one care what was best for her to having people argue about it and that felt comforting. "Did you bring new pictures?" She asked, changing the subject.

Mike had started bringing El pictures so she could feel at least a little attached to the outside world. Sometimes she used the pictures to find people in the Void, sometimes she just enjoyed looking. She kept her collection in a shoe box and Mike would tell her stories that went along with each of the pictures.

Much too soon, Hopper announced that it was time to take Mike home and El waited in the main room of the cabin for the radio to tell her that Mike was at his house and Hopper was driving back. Marco, *I wish I didn't have to leave.* Polo, *I can't wait until you come back.*

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The boys had gathered in Mike's basement Saturday night after blowing through all their quarters much faster than planned at the arcade.

"What's wrong with you?" Lucas asked Mike who had been on the verge of sulking most of the evening.

"Yeah, I figured now that You're spending all your time with the *Chief*, you'd be in a better mood," Dustin teased with the word Chief in air quotes.

"He's not going to let her go to school," Mike grumbled, now convinced of the eventuality.

"What? But I thought after this year-," Lucas exclaimed.

"Yeah, that's what he says but if you and nail him down about school, he refuses to make any commitments and just says he's going to have to see."

There were groans all around hearing this. Everyone knew that "we'll

see" was actually parent speak for "no, but I don't want to argue about it right now."

"So what do we do?" Will asked. Will had spent barely any time with El and yet he felt loyalty to her almost as strong as Mike's. He wouldn't be here if it weren't but for her.

"Make sure he doesn't have any excuses," Max pronounced gaining stares from the rest of the group. "Think about it. This is someone who puts a lot of effort into justifying why whatever that he's doing is logical. He doesn't want to seem arbitrary. So when next year rolls around, if she's not at least close the being at a 9th grade level academically, he can say no because she needs more time to get ready and not look like a jerk."

"So if we make sure she's ready," Mike spoke slowly, turning the idea around in his mind, "the only excuse we leave him is: no, because I'm over protective and I changed my mind."

"Right," Max confirmed, "which he wouldn't want to admit to."

It was impressive how quickly Max had gotten an accurate read on Hopper's personality.

"Ok, but how to we make sure she's ready?" Lucas asked.

"What is she doing now?" Dustin looked to Mike.

"Hopper buys her math workbooks to do while he's at work, but when she gets stuck, he's not there to answer questions so she gets frustrated. Then he has her reading and looking up words she doesn't know."

"That's it?" Dustin asked incredulously.

"That's not going to cut it," Lucas shook his head.

"No shit. You can't homeschool someone when you're never home. When I go over there and work on her books with her, she gets it but she can't just be expected to teach herself. Shes smart, she just needs someone there."

"But you can't talk to her on the radio?" Will asked.

"No, that's one of the rules. Radios are not for conversations because conversations can be intercepted."

"That explains the secret code," Max said primarily to herself. The boys (other than Mike) looked at her in surprise. Since when was a secret code and since when was El letting Max in on secrets? "I was waiting for my ride after the Snow Ball and Hopper made us sit in the car because he didn't want El out in the open. We talked," Max explained.

"What secret code?" Lucas asked.

"It's Morse code-" Mike started.

"Morse code isn't secret, dumbass," Lucas interrupted and Mike punched him in the shoulder.

"We can only *use* Morse code. The code is two words: Marco, Polo."

"That's actually pretty hilarious," Lucas said with no sympathy for Mike's situation whatsoever.

"Can we focus please?" Mike pleaded.

"Hey, remember when Jennifer Spears got mono in 6th grade?" Dustin asked.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Lucas looked at Dustin like he was an idiot.

"She was out almost the whole year, remember? And her mom would put-"

"-tape recorders in the classrooms so she could keep up, holy shit, that's it!" Mike finished Dustin's thought for him. "We can divide up the subjects and make tapes. She still won't have anyone to ask questions, but at least she'll have more to go off of than just reading workbooks."

"I call science!" Dustin yelled.

"You can't just call science," Lucas said with a look of disdain.

"Yeah I can. Just did."

"Guys!" Mike yelled.

"Since we don't have a ton of time," Max attempted to reintroduce reasonableness to the conversation, "we need to focus on subjects with required prerequisites. You can learn biology without having a foundation in geology, but you can't just learn algebra as a stand alone subject."

"It will have to be Math and English," Will pronounced. "Can you going to borrow her workbooks so we can make tapes about them?"

"I don't want to have to wait until next week to ask her for them because we won't have a ton of time to work on them after Christmas break, but there are duplicate textbooks of everything the school uses at the library. At least then she's learning the same stuff everyone else has gone through."

"Um yeah," Dustin avoided making direct eye contact with anyone, "about that. I'm probably banned for life."

"From the library," Lucas asked, "What'd you do?"

"I was trying to figure out what kind of animal D'art was and I couldn't check out more books because I was over my limit so I might have just run out the door with them."

"That is, hands down, the nerdiest beginning to a life of crime ever," Max shook her head.

"I took them back!"

"Ok fine," Mike once again reigned them in, "Dustin, you can round up tape players and blank tapes. The rest of us can go to the library."

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The following Saturday was the last Saturday before school resumed. Mike climbed into Hopper's Blazer with a somewhat full and very lumpy backpack.

"Does El have a tape player?" Mike asked.

"I think I might have one at the cabin, I'm not actually sure. Why?" Hopper's was wondering how many crappy pop music mixed tapes he was going to be subjected to and desperately trying to think if there were any headphones at the cabin.

"We have a plan for helping her get ready for school," Mike said simply.

"I very clearly remember having this conversation last weekend," Hopper was exasperated.

"I'm not saying *when*, I'm just saying that *eventually*, she's going to need to go to school, right? Or at least *eventually*, she's going to need to function as a literate adult with an education, right?"

Hopper grunted. "Do not put unrealistic time tables in her head, you hear me?"

"I'm not, I promise. I just figured that its hard for her to basically teach herself all day long and have to wait for you to get home before she can ask questions. So we made tapes for her to listen to."

"That's...that's actually a really smart idea," Hopper admitted. Several minutes passed before Hopper asked Mike, "Have you ever heard of a feral child?"

"No. I mean, not other than like The Jungle Book."

"In real life, most examples of feral children are kids who were abused and isolated like El was growing up at the lab. If you don't talk to a baby, that baby doesn't pick up on language and after a certain age, the brain changes and that child can lose the ability to learn forever. El's not at that point, thank God, but it's kind of the same thing to a less extreme degree. I've been researching it and there's a lot of debate on the subject, but the most likely thing is she isn't learning to speak like you learn a first language, she's learning it



like you learn a second language. So if you can use those tapes to get her to talk more, the better it will be for her."

Mike felt bad for assuming that Hopper hadn't put more thought into El's education. It was clear that the man was very vested in seeing El being up to speed with her peers.

"She's worried she won't be ready," Mike hoped El wouldn't be upset at him for disclosing her fear but he felt that it was unlikely he'd have another moment like this with Hopper any time soon.

Hopper nodded. "So am I," he confessed. "And I'm worried that she'll be made fun of. She's been through enough, she doesn't need that."

Mike told himself that he wanted Eleven to go to school because she wanted a normal life so badly. But, if he was being completely honest, at least part of it was that he wanted her to go to school so that they could be together more. He wondered if he was being selfish for pushing it.

"If she's not ready?" Mike asked hoping there wouldn't have to be a plan B.

"Then we'll figure it out," Hopper said resolutely. "Once I move us back into town, my days won't be as long. If she has to be home schooled another year, it's not the end of the world."

"So she'd still get to come out of hiding?"

"Well, yeah. If no one's looking for her or sniffing around after a year, anyway. I wasn't planning on living in the middle of nowhere sleeping on a damn cot forever. Two years is going to be long enough, my back will probably never be the same."

## 6. Chapter 6

**A/N Thanks again to everyone who has read, favorited, followed and reviewed. Your responses are motivating!**

**Post Christmas break, late January time frame.**

"Each tape has a number on it, see?" Mike enthusiastically showed Eleven a shoe box with a dozen tapes in it. "And that number is on the list and it tells you what's on the tape. That way, once you're done with one, you can send it back to me and we can record something new over it for you. Make sense?"

"Some of these tapes...alright, mostly *Dustin's* tapes, maybe you should listen to them when Hopper's not around, OK? Anything on the list that's written in black ink is fine. Blue ink, just wait for him to go to work."

"Why?" it as only Saturday morning and Hopper would not be back at work for two days. Eleven couldn't wait that long to find out what was on the tape with the blue titles.

"Well, like for example, tape three? Grammar?"

"I hate grammar," she said ruefully.

"So does Dustin, so he decided it would be more entertaining to learn the parts of speech using as many swear words as possible."

"But Hopper likes swear words," Eleven was not sure why Mike felt this would be a problem.

"It's different when kids do it," Mike tried to explain.

Eleven nodded. She had noticed this distinction when it came to having rules. Evidently, it also applied to swearing. She wondered what else was different when adults did it compared to kids doing it.

"These tapes," Mike held up tapes numbered 11 and 12, "are the best tapes. These aren't school stuff, these are just for talking. You put the tape in the player and you push the red button like this. Then you

talk into this little part over here. It's a mic, kind of like a radio but instead of sending your voice to another radio, it just puts it on the tape like this..."

Mike re-wound the tape and played back "then you talk into this little part over here-"

"Every week, we trade tapes. Then you can listen to what I recorded and I can listen to what you recorded. Got it?" he asked.

"Got it," she confirmed.

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Eleven quickly became obsessed with the tape cassettes Mike brought her. Her team of tutors were completely incapable of staying on subject and El loved it. Along with actual academic topics, Eleven learned about the living, breathing soap opera that was Hawkins Middle School and it was better than the Young and the Restless.

But Eleven had to agree that the best tapes by far were 11 and 12. For 353 days she had listened to Mike carry on a one-sided conversation with her and it was heartbreaking. Listening to him now that he knew she was listening was completely different. Before he was sad and in pain, now he was excited and optimistic. Even when he reported that he had had a bad day, he was comforted to know that he was actually sharing that with her...even if she wouldn't receive the message for a few days.

Talking to Mike was a challenge. Eleven had to work to say that many words to someone without them speaking back. She had full conversations with Mike, but when they were both there, Eleven only contributed one line at a time. Sometimes only one word at a time. Sometimes only one gesture at a time. The tapes were lots of fun, but they were also work.

As much as it made her happy to have her friends back in her life, it also...didn't. Every day they were doing something new and even though Hopper now brought people to see her, her life varied little

from day to day and her surroundings never changed. Much like being able to see Mike in the Void for 353 days but not touch him or respond to him, hearing about a life she couldn't participate in was part good, part bad. What had Hopper called that? Ambiguous?

She wouldn't run away again. She wouldn't fight Hopper over the one more year. But maybe...for just a day...he could take her to a different place where no one was looking. Eleven had learned a new word for what she wanted. She wanted a vacation.

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Hopper knocked twice, once, three times. The locks flew open and El was waiting.

"I want to see Mama again," she said insistently.

"And hello to you, too," he ruffled her hair affectionately as he walked past her to hang up his coat and hat.

"I want to see Mama," she repeated following him into the kitchen where he removed his belt and side arm.

Hopper pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed deeply. "El, look..." he started

"The lab is here," she interrupted, "why would the Bad Men be watching somewhere else?"

"Why would they be watching your mom? One of the people who tried expose what was going on in there? Gee, El, can't think of a single reason." He walked past her again to get a beer from the refrigerator.

"Ask Dr Owens. He knows who they watch," Eleven was undeterred.

"I thought you hated Dr Owens."

"I do hate him," Eleven said, "but he can be...helpful."

"Uh huh. I'll see what I can do, but just don't get your hopes up."

The subject was dropped for a nearly a week until Saturday night when Hopper returned after bringing Mike home.

"Ok, kid, listen up," Hopper began as the pair sat down to dinner. "I'm going to leave real early tomorrow before you get up and I'll probably be gone until late, so you're going to be on your own."

"Why?"

"Because I'm driving out to see your Aunt Becky."

"I'm coming," Eleven said flatly.

"No, you're not," Hopper unconsciously sat up making himself somewhat taller and more imposing.

"Yes, I am," Eleven shot back, completely unimpressed by the posturing.

"No, because I'm driving out there to arrange a visit between you and your mom. You're not going until I know it's safe so I can't very well just show up with you unannounced. But, hey, I don't have to go," he trailed off and she glared at him. *Check mate, kid.*

"Can't you call her? Then when you go, I can go?" Eleven suggested.

"I can't call her until I know if her phone is tapped or not, so I'm just going to have to talk to her in person."

"Tapped?" Eleven asked.

"It's a way of listening in on someone else's phone calls so you know what they're saying," Hopper explained, "The lab was listening to people all over town. Phones aren't always safe."

"You talk to Mrs Byers on the phone," Eleven pointed out.

"Not about you," he said gruffly.

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Hopper reached the Ives residence shortly before noon the next day. Becky opened the chained door to see who it was and must have recognized him immediately because the first words out of her mouth were "Is Jane alright? Did you find her?"

After assuring Becky that El was safe, sound and in a known location, the two sat down at the kitchen table over sandwiches and a cup of coffee to talk.

"I wasn't sure what to do when Jane just showed up, so I called you because you were the only other person who seemed to know about her. I spoke to someone...Florence, maybe? But you weren't there. By the time I got off the phone, Jane was gone."

"I apologize because I did not understand from your message that she'd run away from you and she certainly didn't tell me that. I feel terrible that you've been worrying for the last three months."

"Can you tell me anything? Where has she been all this time? Who was taking care of her?"

"The simple version is that your sister was right about everything concerning Jane," Hopper had to remind himself to use the unfamiliar name. "She was stolen from birth and raised in the Hawkins lab. She was used for experiments conducted by unnamed government agencies trying to develop psychic powers to be used by military, intelligence, God knows what. Jane was told the man who ran the program, Brenner-

"-I know who he is," Becky interrupted, her contempt for the man evident in her voice.

"She was told that he was her father. Fortunately for all involved, he was killed last year. I know it sounds crazy, but you've seen what Jane can do. Once you know she exists, well..."

"...the rest doesn't sound far fetched anymore," Becky Ives finished Hopper's sentence.

"Exactly. She spent her first twelve years growing up in the Hawkins

lab. She escaped the same night another kid, Will Byers went missing. I was trying to find the Byers kid and ended up stumbling on Jane's trail instead which is how I ended up coming out here last year. End of the day, we found both kids alive and I've been helping to hide Jane ever since so she doesn't end up back in that lab," Hopper finished.

"I thought the lab was closed now? At least, that's what I saw on the news. Something about toxic chemicals?"

Hopper avoided correcting Becky's understanding of the lab. Some things just had to be seen to be understood. "It's closed, but you can't tell me there aren't people out there who would still love to get their hands on her. To use her or, if they can't, to silence her. That's why she's supposed to have been staying off the radar.

"Until she got it into her head that she was going to come find her mother," Becky said knowingly. "When Terry set her mind to something, stubborn didn't begin to describe it. If Jane is anything like her, well, lets just say that it's no surprise she ended up on my doorstep. I guess the question is what happens now?"

"That's one of the things I came here to talk to you about," Hopper leaned forward in his chair. This was the conversation he'd been dreading.

"You haven't just been helping to hide her, have you?" Becky guessed.

Rather than answer the question, Hopper slid the birth certificate across the table. Becky considered it impassively.

"Lab records have been altered to say that she died during an experiment and this is a false identity that will allow her to have a normal life once the dust settles," Hopper explained. "I have a person on the inside who feeds me information. She's safe with me, she's happy, she has friends. I want her to stay where she is, but she also wants to be able to see her mom. I'm here to make sure that's safe and that's something you're up for."

"I think," Becky began slowly, "I think we can make that work."

There was a fair amount of time spent that afternoon discussing logistics. Hopper wanted to sweep the home for bugs (although if the home were being monitored, surely something would have happened after Eleven had just boldly shown up on the front porch in November with no precautions whatsoever) and to check for liabilities, escape routes, that sort of thing. There was baby proofing and then there was Eleven proofing.

A return date was selected two weeks later and Hopper was just about ready to leave when Becky asked him, "Oh, one other thing, did Jane ever find the other little girl?"

*Son of a...*

"What other little girl?"

"The day Jane came here, she said she could contact Terry by putting the TV on static and wearing a blindfold"

"Yeah, I'm familiar," Hopper said impatiently.

"She said that Terry showed her another little girl at the lab. I gave Jane Terry's newspaper clippings of all the children Terry thought had been abducted by the lab over the years and Jane picked out the little girl she said Terry had shown her. Jane tried to make contact with this other little girl the same way, but said she couldn't find her. I was on the phone trying to call you and when I hung up, I'd found that she'd cleaned out my wallet and run away."

"She cleaned out your wallet?" he asked incredulously, "What did she take?"

"Oh, I don't know. Thirty, forty dollars maybe? Its not that big of a deal," she assured.

"It is that big of a deal," Hopper contradicted, "but this is the first time I'm hearing about another kid from the lab or that she went somewhere other than here. How many nights did she stay with you?"

"None, she left that same night. Is that important? Does that put her in danger?" Becky asked, worried.



"In danger? No," Hopper answered his own rhetorical question. *In trouble?, he thought, Oh hell, yeah.* "It's just not quite what she's told me. Do you happen to have any information on this other little girl?"

"Jane took the only newspaper clipping with her, but I know she was an Indian girl living in London. I think she was about five years old when she was taken, but I'm not completely sure on that detail."

## 7. Chapter 7

Patience had never been Eleven's strong suit. She woke up to an otherwise empty cabin and although she was expecting it, the day ahead felt very long and tedious. She signaled to Mike, he signaled back, she ate breakfast, she washed her dishes, she tried to distract herself with school work but found she was too antsy even to listen to tapes. And then she looked at the clock and saw it wasn't even ten o'clock yet.

She sat down to watch TV, flipping from station to station. When she reached a static channel, she paused only briefly before running to her room to get her blindfold. She didn't normally visit Hopper during the day to see what he was up to. Sometimes she did when he was late enough to make her worry but Hopper didn't like it. Police work, he had told her, meant that sometimes he had to be "discreet" (which she eventually realized was just a fancy word for keeping secrets) and it wasn't appropriate for her to be listening in. This was different, she rationalized. She wasn't eavesdropping on Hopper's work, she was just observing the conversation between Hopper and Aunt Becky...a conversation Hopper should never have excluded her from in the first place.

The first few times El visited Hopper, he was still driving. Mostly he just stared straight ahead, occasionally he sang along to the radio. Eventually, she found him talking to Aunt Becky.

"Ok, well, I guess we'll see you in a couple of weeks then," Hopper was walking towards the front door.

"I'm really looking forward to it," Aunt Becky replied warmly.

Eleven's heart soared. Hopper was going to take her to see Mama!

"Oh and one other thing," Aunt Becky called out after Hopper, "did Jane ever find the other little girl?"

"Oh shit," Eleven said aloud in the void.

Hopper did his best to keep his face emotionless while Becky Ives

explained about the other girl and Eleven running away from her, but Eleven knew him too well to fall for that. He was *pissed*.

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The drive back to Hawkins was long and it was probably for the best that Eleven was at the other end of it. No, make that *definitely* for the best.

Jim Hopper knew he had many flaws, and he knew that control issues and a temper were high on the list. He figured Eleven had a full day he couldn't account for between the time she ran away from Becky Ives and resurfaced at Joyce's place the following night. Not knowing what Eleven had been up to, where she'd been and what kind of danger she'd put herself in was exactly the sort of thing that made him want to swoop her up and move her to Antarctica.

And what about this other little girl? How could she just not mention something that big?

Of equal importance, what could and should he do about it now? His instincts were to take command of any given situation and impose his authority on everyone else, but that had proven to be a monumentally bad strategy when it came to Eleven. This was also something that had happened three months ago and they'd already hashed it out on their way to close the gate.

No, he argued with himself, they hadn't hashed *this* part out because he didn't know about *this* part because Eleven conveniently omitted it.

Hopper growled to himself.

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Eleven looked at the clock. Two-two-five. It had taken Hopper about four hours to get to Mama. He had just left Aunt Becky's. He should get home around six-two-five, but she decided to give herself until

five-two-five in case he drove extra fast.

Eleven decided she needed help. Marco, she signaled. Soon enough came the response, Polo.

She signaled again: t-a-l-k

Mike paused. Was it Eleven breaking Hopper's rules or was it Hopper testing Mike to see if Mike would break them?

*"If you can't follow the rules, then the visits stop. Are we clear?"* The words rang in Mike's memory.

But what if Eleven was in trouble? What if she needed help? Not even Hopper could blame him for checking...who was he kidding, that was *exactly* the sort of thing Hopper would blame him for.

Eleven signaled again: t-a-l-k

Mike decided to take the risk and responded: w-h-e-r-e

Eleven replied: M-i-r-k-w-o-o-d

Mike grabbed his radio, threw it in his backpack and jumped on his bike.

Mike was a lot faster on a bike than Eleven was on foot, he waited anxiously for her still slightly worried that Hopper would pull up and bust him. He released a breath he didn't realize he was holding when he caught sight of Eleven walking through the trees. They greeted one another with a tight hug.

"Is everything ok? What's so important? Where's Hopper?" Mike asked in rapid fire succession.

Eleven took a deep breath. This was going to take a lot of words.

"Hopper went to see Mama so that I can visit."

"That's great, El!" Mike exclaimed, "I know you've been wanting to go back to see her."

Eleven shook her head, there was more.

"When I went to see Mama, I didn't just see Mama. Mama showed me my sister."

"Sister?" Mike asked, stunned.

"Kali. Eight. I left Aunt Becky to find her in Chicago."

"You went to Chicago?!"

"For one night, then I came back. But I never told Hopper and then Aunt Becky told Hopper and now he's really mad. I need to make him not mad."

"Oh. Now I understand," Mike said sympathetically, "How long until Hopper's back?"

"Less than three hours," Eleven said, "I should go back early just in case."

"How do you know your aunt told him?"

"I visited them. Like in the bath. I wanted to know if I could see Mama so I spied and she told him."

"What exactly did she tell him?"

"That Mama showed me Kali and that I ran away from Aunt Becky."

"Did she tell him you went to Chicago and found Kali?"

Eleven just shook her head no in response.

"Hopper doesn't know you saw him talking to your aunt, right?"

Eleven shook her head again.

"Ok, we need to think. He already knew you ran away and he's gotten over that, so this is about you not telling him. If you tell him before he has a chance to say anything, then he doesn't have anything to be mad about."

Mike's theory sounded perfectly logical, but there was a wrinkle in it. "He would be even more mad if I tell him what I did while I was gone," Eleven said somewhat sheepishly. There was a pretty good reason she didn't get into the details in the first place.

"Why, what did you do?" Mike was almost afraid to ask.

"Used my powers outside in the day to move a train, robbed a store with Kali and her friends who had guns, helped her find a Bad Man who Kali tried to kill but I stopped her, and then we were all almost arrested but we ran away from police," saying it aloud made it all sound even worse.

"Yeah, you should definitely not tell him all of that. He'd *kill* you. I mean, not literally, but...wow. That would be bad. Sometimes parents think they want all the details and they really don't. Tell him you went to Chicago to find Kali, but maybe not exactly everything you did. Just keep it simple."

"I should go back," Eleven said regretfully.

They walked together until they came to the road for the cabin. Eleven took Mike's hand and checked his watch: four-four-seven.

They didn't say it, but they both assumed they would be missing a few Saturday visits which made saying goodbye harder than usual. They shared a fierce hug and an innocent kiss before parting; the lone advantage of their circumstances was an actual private moment to say goodbye.

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By the time Hopper reached the end of the dirt road leading to his cabin, it was after 6pm. He killed the engine and sat for a moment finishing his cigarette. He played with the blue hair tie bracelet around his wrist that he and Eleven had taken to sharing ever since he'd shared its history with her. He was still pretty pissed off just on principle alone, but he reminded himself that it was his harsh over reaction the last time that led to Eleven running away to begin with.

He promised himself that he would not lose his shit and get into another yelling match with Eleven, took a deep breath, set his jaw and started walking the last five minute leg of the day's journey.

Hopper expected Eleven to be dying of curiosity to know what her Aunt Becky had said and he assumed she would pounce on him the moment he walked in the door. He felt vaguely bad that he was going to rain on Eleven's parade...which is why she shouldn't hide stuff like the existence of other psychic kids from the lab, he told himself. Served her right. Hopper knocked twice, once, three times. Nothing. He knocked again: twice, once, three times. Still nothing. He knocked a third time, this time much louder. Surely she hadn't fallen asleep? Twice, once, three times. A moment later, the locks slid open and he let himself in the cabin. Eleven was nowhere to be seen.

"El?" He called. No response. "Eleven?" he called insistently. Still nothing. What the hell? For someone who should have no idea anything was up, Eleven was certainly acting very guilty. And then he caught sight of her blindfold and it clicked. *That nosy little...* "Get out here. Now," he commanded, standing in the middle of the living room with his hands on his hips.

He knew she had to have heard him; he was loud and the cabin was small. He was not about to repeat himself, so he waited for compliance. A mop of dark curls emerged from under Eleven's quilt and very slowly, she shuffled out of her bedroom and wrapped herself around Hopper's waist. Hopper stood there feeling completely out of his element. He had learned how to handle Eleven yelling and belligerently hurling objects around the cabin, but this?

"Are you very mad?" She whispered craning her neck to look up at him.

"Yes," he lied looking down at such a sharp angle that his chin nearly touched his chest.

"Should have told you," she conceded.

"Yes, you should have," he said with forced sternness.

Eleven's eyes threatened tears and she hid her face in his shirt. In

some rational part of his brain, Hopper knew he was setting a dangerous precedent that would not doubt come to haunt him for the remainder of her teenage years, but he couldn't help it. She just seemed so...so *sad*. He pulled her into a bear hug. "Come on now," he chided, "it's not as bad as all that."

Eleven sniffled and thought about how and where to begin her story. "Kali is Eight," she began as she unconsciously touched the 011 tattoo on her forearm. "She ran away from Papa a long time ago and I found her in Chicago. She only wants to hurt the Bad Men. She looks for them so she can hurt them and she wanted my help. She says it's better to fight than to hide but she doesn't seem happy."

"Well, El, you stumbled onto one of the great truths in life: the person who seeks revenge digs two graves. Do you know what that means?" she shook her head. "It's one thing to fight back, especially when the fight comes to you. It's something else entirely to go looking for a fight. If Kali grew up the same way you did in that lab, I'm not surprised she feels like she has some scores to settle. But when you stay angry like that, you end up hurting yourself. Kid, you have every right in the world to be angry with Brenner and all his people, but you also have every right in the world to move on and have an actual life."

And because she was just so tired of carrying something so heavy by herself, she said the words she'd been afraid to say out loud, "She thinks Papa is alive."

"You were there the night he died, do you think he could have survived?"

Eleven shook her head.

"And if he is, then we'll deal with it, right?"

She nodded.

"Ok. Now we have one other thing to talk about," Hopper pulled away, leaned down and held Eleven by her upper arms to ensure she was looking at him. "You cannot do things like take money out of your Aunt Becky's wallet. When you take something that doesn't



belong to you, it's stealing. I understand when you were forced to do it to survive but that's not the case anymore. When I take you back to visit your mom, you're going to apologize to your Aunt Becky."

Eleven nodded and asked, "Grounded?"

"You bet your ass you're grounded. One week, no visits, got it?"

"Got it," she replied quietly. She wasn't happy about it, but she had expected at least that much.

"But then I get to go see Mama?"

"Yeah, kid, then you get to go see your mom."

## 8. Chapter 8

Stranger Things is something my middle school daughter and I indulge in together and it's making me realize how many things from my 1980's childhood are totally lost on her. When I try to explain things like the gloriously random movie selection of Mom and Pop video rental stores, she gives me the same look I give my 10-years-older-than-me husband when he tries to explain things like why the people in Close Encounters of the Third Kind didn't immediately recognize Devil's Tower. It was a National Monument, how could *none of them know*? But I digress.

Today I am inspired by random cultural references from the early to mid 80's that I have actually had to explain to my child and in doing so triggered my own nostalgia.

I am also officially sad that the show is only intended to last 4, possibly 5 seasons thereby removing all chances of the movie Heathers just randomly playing in the background at some point in the show. *Que sera sera*.

Takes place early February-ish 1985

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"I need a favor," Dustin announced as he walked up to Steve's car in the Hawkins High School parking lot Friday after school.

"Dustin? What are you doing here?" Steve asked.

"I just said: I need a favor," Dustin repeated in the tone of voice that contained an implied "duh" at the end of the sentence.

"What kind of favor?" Steve was justifiably suspicious. Steve liked the younger boy, but still, you never knew with Dustin.

"I need you to rent a movie for me," Dustin said and when Steve raised an eyebrow, Dustin clarified, "Not *that* kind of movie, I want

Nightmare on Elm Street. They have it at Miller's but the guy who used to rent me anything doesn't work there any more and now I can't get it."

"Have you seen it?"

"No, which is why I want to rent it. Keep up, Steve."

"I mean, are you sure you can handle it? It's supposed to be really gory."

"It's a movie. I've seen worse first hand. I think I'm fine," Dustin reasoned and really, Steve couldn't disagree. What movie could possibly compare to their lives lately?

"Fine," Steve agreed, "but if you end up with nightmares, don't blame me. And don't stick me with any late fees."

"I'm not gonna get nightmares or late fees, don't worry about it."

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That evening, Dustin ran down the Wheeler's basement stairs, "Guess what I got guys?" Dustin held up the movie case like a trophy.

"No way!" Lucas exclaimed. "How did you get Miller's to rent you an R movie?"

"Did you run out with it? Like the library?" Max asked, "Because that's seriously escalating your life of crime."

Mike looked at Will to make sure he didn't need an out. Will had been through more than anyone else and if he wasn't up for a violent slasher movie, Mike didn't want him to feel like he was the only one.

"I may not sleep for a week, but I'm in!" Mike's concern was unnecessary as Will didn't even hesitate.

"Me too," Mike agreed making quick work of re-attaching the VCR cables to the basement TV.

The group was so engrossed in the movie, they all jumped when Nancy yelled down the stairs over an hour later, "Mike!"

"What?" Mike yelled back scrambling to hit the pause button on the VCR.

"Mom told me to check and see if any of your friends need a ride home," Nancy stopped mid-sentence once she was far enough down the stairs to see the TV screen. "Holy shit, Mike! Mom would have a stroke if she knew you were watching this."

"Like she wouldn't have a stroke if she knew you'd gone monster hunting?" he pointed out and Nancy shrugged. It was a fair point. "The guys are all staying, Max needs a ride home. The movie is almost over, can you wait?"

"I can get myself home," Max volunteered.

"It's not a big deal, I'm heading out anyway. Leave in about 20 minutes?" Nancy asked.

"Yeah, thanks."

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Nancy had left Mike and his friends to finish the movie while she finished getting ready. She was hanging out with girl friends for a night of pure, monster free normalcy and she'd traded two hours of Holly sitting to earn the use of her mother's car. The last hurdle before she was free and clear was to return Max to her home.

"Looks like no one else is home," Nancy said as she pulled into Max's driveway.

"That's good," Max reassured her.

"You're ok?"

"Trust me, it's better alone."

"Yeah," Nancy said sympathetically, "I've heard all about your step brother. Is he still giving you problems?"

"Less so, but yeah," Max admitted. "I may need to get that bat from Steve and remind him not to mess with me."

"Seriously, Max, if you ever need anything, just ask, ok? I'm a pretty good shot."

Max walked into the house that still didn't (and probably would never) feel like home and enjoyed the silence for however long it might last. She checked the clock: 8:52pm. That meant she made it home before her curfew and that it was 11:52pm in California. Her dad was a night owl, she thought, he wouldn't mind.

As soon as Susan Mayfield became Susan Hargrove, she wanted to forget Max's father ever existed. Calling him while her mother was around was considered an act of betrayal so Max tried to limit her calls to times when she could hide it from Susan. Of course this also meant calling collect to avoid a long distance charge on the phone bill that would be a dead giveaway.

Max picked up the receiver and dialed 0.

"Operator," the woman's voice was bored.

"I'd like to make a collect call, please," Max asked.

"Name?" the operator asked.

"Max Mayfield,"

"Number?"

"323-465-3182."

"One moment while I try your call," she said.

Max waited in silence.

"I'm sorry, the charges were declined, did you want to make another call?"

"No thanks," Max said as she was hanging up the phone.

Asshole.

Max loved her mother, but she hated her weakness. She hated that Susan reinvented herself completely for whoever she was with in order to please them. Neil didn't want to compete with Max's dad, so Susan cut him out of both of their lives. Neil was a bully just like Billy, and Susan said nothing because she was afraid to rock the boat. For the umpteenth time that day, Max vowed she would not become her mother. If her own father wouldn't accept her calls, then screw him too.

Max got ready for bed so that as soon as a car pulled up to the house, Billy's or Neil's it didn't really matter, she could quickly pretend to be asleep. She wasn't worried about nightmares. There was nothing her imagination could torment her with that compared with her blended family hell.

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The boys laid out four sleeping bags on the Wheeler's basement floor with a pile of junk food in the center. They had all (eventually) welcomed the addition of Eleven and Max into their circle of friends, but since no one's parents were progressive enough for co-ed overnights, the sleepover was an opportunity to spend some time with just the original members of The Party without being jerks for excluding the girls.

For that night, they passed around the latest comic books and debated the minutia of Star Wars. And for at least that one night, it was almost like it was before the Upside Down. Almost. Until they were finally all passed out and Will woke up gasping for air. Mike checked the clock and saw that it was almost 2am. He ran upstairs hoping Nancy hadn't broken her curfew. She was the nearest thing to an adult, he could ask for help.

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A gunshot woke Hopper and Eleven in the middle of the night. Hopper silently put on yesterday's jeans, slid into his unlaced boots and reached for the nearest firearm intent on finding out who or what had set off the trip wire. Heavy footfall on the front porch and loud knocking ruled out a deer or other wildlife.

Hopper and Eleven had discussed but had never used a protocol for handling an unexpected visitor to the cabin. There was a reason Hopper had given Eleven the lone bedroom in his grandfather's hunting cabin and why he had positioned himself opposite the cabin's only door. If someone was coming through that door uninvited, Eleven was going to have an extra few seconds to get away and Hopper was going to have a clear shot.

She was standing in the doorway of her bedroom, looking to Hopper for a plan.

"Hide," he said quietly.

Although Eleven was fairly confident that she could handle an aggressive intruder as well as if not better than Hopper, she retreated to a narrow corner between the bookshelf and the wall where a person would have to actually be standing right in front of her to see her.

Between an overcast night completely obscuring the moon and the absence of a porch light, it was pitch black and impossible for Hopper to get a visual on whoever had the bad judgment to come pounding at his door. He pulled the hammer of the pistol and prepared to open the door just wide enough to incapacitate whoever was on the other side when he heard a familiar voice.

"Chief? It's Jonathan. Something's wrong with Will."

Hopper opened the door, but didn't let his guard down until he personally confirmed Jonathon was alone.

"What happened?" he finally asked after making a visual sweep of the woods surrounding the cabin.

"He was staying the night at the Wheeler's," Jonathon explained anxiously, "Nancy called and said he woke up like he couldn't breathe, didn't know where he was and couldn't snap out of it so Mom sent me here to get you."

"Is he at the Wheeler's now?" Hopper asked tying the laces to his boots.

"No, Nancy is bringing him to our house, Mom said to have you meet her there."

"I'm coming," Eleven walked out of the bedroom, fully dressed with her own shoes in hand.

"I told you to hide," Hopper responded.

"I did hide and now I'm coming," Eleven calmly explained as she sat down on the arm of the sofa to put her shoes on.

"No," he corrected, "you're grounded." Hopper retrieved a flannel shirt.

"You said grounded meant no visits," Eleven argued, "This isn't a visit, it's an emergency."

"The answer is no," Hopper said more forcefully as though that was simply going to end the discussion.

Eleven glowered and then changed tactics entirely.

"Might not be safe to be here alone...," she said airily.

"What?" Hopper was busy gathering firearms and ammunition and wasn't sure he'd heard her right.

"If there's something out there...you never know...," Eleven continued with a shrug.

"Oh for Christ's sake," Hopper muttered reaching for a box of shells.

"You would never forgive yourself," El shook her head in mock sympathy at an imaginary, grieving Hopper.



"You know what your new word of the day is?" He said pointing at her, "Manipulate. M-a-n-i-p-u-l-a-t-e. Look it up when we get back. Now go get in the car."

Eleven grabbed a coat from a hook near the door and ran outside before he could change his mind. If something was wrong with Will, she wanted to be able to help.

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Hopper pulled up to the Byers' house and parked next to Jonathon. Eleven hadn't been to the Byers' house since the night she closed the gate. She followed Hopper and Jonathon inside to find that Nancy Wheeler had not only brought Will, but also Mike, Dustin and Lucas. Will was seated on the sofa next to Joyce, pale and sweating with labored breathing.

"Alright, someone tell me exactly what happened," Hopper directed his comments at Mike, Dustin and Lucas.

"We were having a sleepover at my house and Will just woke up gasping for air," Mike explained.

"Yeah and when we tried to talk to him," Dustin added, "it was like his eyes wouldn't focus."

"Like he was looking through you, like you weren't there," Lucas said.

"Was he pale like this?" Hopper asked, "Sweating?"

Mike nodded.

Hopper knelt in front of Will and took his right wrist to check his pulse and found the boy's heart was racing.

"What was he doing before?"

"Sleeping," Dustin answered, perhaps with a bit too much smart ass tone.

"What was he doing *before* he was sleeping?" Hopper clarified, irritated.

"I don't know," Mike said, "we were talking about just stuff."

"Stuff or Upside Down?" Hopper pressed for details.

"Just stuff. Dumb stuff, comics and shit, no monsters."

"And before that?"

"We watched a movie," Mike responded.

"What movie?"

None of the boys immediately answered.

"What. Movie?" Hopper repeated his question.

"Nightmareonelmstreet," Dustin mumbled.

"What?"

"It's a slasher movie," Johnathon explained, "Seriously guys?"

Hopper turned his attention to Joyce Byers.

"Joyce, you know what this looks like."

"No," she said angrily, "no. You can't ignore this."

"Joyce," he began again, "he had a perfectly normal nightmare from watching a horror movie *he shouldn't have watched*," here he turned to stare down the other three boys before turning back to Joyce, "and he had a panic attack. I know guys who can't be around fireworks because it sounds too much like gun fire. It hit him too close to home. That's all."

"But what if it's not? What if it's that thing?" Joyce was feeling desperate.

"You can't go through his life assuming everything that happens is a sign that he's back in danger," Hopper said gently.

Eleven snorted from across the room and if Hopper heard it, he pretended that he didn't.

"Ok, look Joyce, that thing -," Hopper started.

"-The Mind Flayer," Dustin interrupted.

"I swear to God, Henderson," Hopper threatened without looking away from Joyce.

"Sorry," Dustin mumbled.

"That *thing*," Hopper pointedly refused to call it a Mind Flayer, "couldn't tolerate heat or water, right?"

"Yeah?" Joyce was not following where Hopper was going with his train of thought.

"Ok Will," Hopper said, "I'm sorry but we have to know."

Without any other warning, Hopper grabbed Will around the torso trapping his arms to his chest, tucked the boy under one arm as though he weighed nothing and strode towards the Byers' bathroom.

"Hop! What are you doing?" Joyce yelled in surprise running after him down the hallway.

Hopper turned on the hot water tap, made sure he wouldn't scald the boy, planted Will in the tub and pulled the lever to divert the water to the shower tap.

Will sputtered and tried to escape the tub out of sheer shock, but the Chief corralled him back in until he was satisfied that Will was pissed off at being unceremoniously tossed into a shower fully clothed and it had nothing to do with the heat or the water.

"See?" Hopper gestured to Joyce, "He's fine."

"Oh my God, Hop, really?"

"Can I get out now?" Will asked from the shower.

"Yes, you can get out," Joyce shoved past Hopper to turn off the water taps and hand Will a towel. "Go change into something dry."

"That doesn't mean everything is fine," Joyce hissed Hopper as Will left them alone in the bathroom.

"It at least means he's not possessed."

"There's a huge range of possibilities between fine and possessed."

"And for tonight, we've narrowed it down to at least not possessed."

Joyce just glared at him.

"It's 3am. He's talking now, he looks like he's breathing normal. Talk to him, find out what happened. If he saw anything like Upside Down, I swear to you I will blow you off and try and chalk it up to a flashback. Alright? I'll come by tomorrow...or, today. Later, ok?"

"Ok," Joyce conceded.

"How are you doing? How are you holding up," Hopper asked, concerned.

Joyce didn't verbalize a response, she just threw up her hands.

"Yeah, I know," Hopper said empathetically. "If you want me to, I'll stay. I'll crash on your sofa and El can camp out on the floor and I won't leave you alone if that will make you feel better."

Joyce groaned and rubbed her face with two hands, "You don't have to do that. Thank you, really, but it's ok. Just come by later and see how he is. Help me be objective."

"Anytime," he said, pulling her into a reassuring hug.

**Nightmare on Elm Street was released to limited theaters, November 1984. The fact that it wasn't broadly released, was done by an unknown studio and had to be edited down in order to get only an R rating gave it a sort of cult following before most people even had the ability to see it. It was released to video in early 1985 and if you didn't have a big chain video**

rental company, finding a copy was actually difficult.

Also, my daughter was previously completely oblivious to the entire concept of long distance phone calls. Because she lives to make me feel old.

## 9. Chapter 9

A/N So, as it turns out, I actually have no earthly idea where I'm going with this story other than the fact that it appears to be progressing in a chronological fashion. Which, on the plus side, makes me suggestible. On the down side, I can't promise this won't turn into a meander.

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Hopper wasn't anything close to what anyone would describe as a "morning person." The top two job perks of being Chief of Police as far as he was concerned was parking wherever the hell he damn well pleased and being able to show up to work whenever he happened to get there. Eleven, however, put him to shame and had adopted the sleeping habits of your average house cat. It was a rare occurrence for her to wake up before him and yet this Saturday morning, there she was at the crack of dawn...or possibly the crack of eight, close enough...eating cereal on the sofa and watching cartoons. Hopper bemoaned the fact that the cabin did not have a second bedroom that would have made it possible for him to sleep through this nonsense.

"You're up early," he noted without opening his eyes.

"Not *that* early," she replied.

He noted the atypical presence of sunlight in the cabin and tracked the problem to the two offending windows high up in the pitch of the ceiling. She followed his gaze and answered the non-verbal question of why in the hell were those curtains not drawn with a simple, "They're too high to see in." And then she went back to ignoring him in favor of her program.

He may have been exhausted from being up half the night, but her intent was impossible to miss: if he was going to deny her visitors on a Saturday, she was going to make him realize what a pain in the ass she could be when she didn't have someone else around to occupy her time.

"I know what you're doing," he told her with a hint of pride. He wasn't pleased she was targeting him, but he wasn't blind to the fact that passive aggressiveness at this level required a degree of social awareness she didn't have even six months ago.

"Watching TV?" her voice was innocent, but she couldn't completely hide the smirk of self satisfaction for having found a way to express her displeasure while still maintaining plausible deniability.

Hopper dragged himself out of bed and, as he passed the sofa on his way to start a pot of coffee, ruffled her hair as a sign of affection and gave her head a light shove that was equally congratulatory and retaliatory.

Even though it started far too early, the morning passed amicably. Hopper deemed it safe enough for Eleven to accompany him outside to reset the trip wire Jonathon had triggered. She collected pine cones to make into fire starters for the wood stove, he pointed out the various animal tracks he'd learned from a boyhood spent outdoors in rural middle-America. Outside during the day in the immediate vicinity of the cabin while he stood watch had been downgraded to being only a little bit stupid.

After lunch, Hopper announced he was headed out for a few hours.

"Where are you going?"

"Last night I said I'd check on Will today so I'm headed to the Byers'."

"Can I come?" Eleven asked hopefully.

"No you can't and don't try to make me feel guilty about it either," he warned anticipating her next move. "That isn't going to work now that I know nothing's out there."

"But I'm bored," she complained, turning bored into a two syllable word.

"Yeah, well next time you're tempted to hide something from me, remember how being grounded is boring," he responded unsympathetically.

Eleven only glared in response.

"I'll bring back something good for dinner, alright?" he said as a peace offering.

"Pizza?"

"Sure, kid. Pizza. Do something productive while I'm gone. Listen to your tapes."

"I need new ones."

"Then give me the old ones to take to Will. Remember, you won't be seeing Mike next Saturday either because we're going to see your mom."

She swore silently to herself. She really was going to have to time her getting into trouble better.

"Can I see Mike tomorrow? Tomorrow is one week," she reminded him.

"I'll see what I can do," he said before walking out the door.

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Hopper pulled up in front of the Byers' home taking note of the presence of Joyce's car and the absence of Jonathon's. Hopper took note of everything, it was something he was no longer able to turn off at will. He stepped onto the slightly sloping porch with a battered file box tucked under one arm and caught himself knocking twice, once and stopped before knocking three times. Force of habit.

"Hey Joyce, how are things?" he greeted her.

"You might have been right. *Maybe*," she said. "Will can't remember what he was dreaming about, but he was confident it was a dream that set him off and not the Upside Down. Don't let it go to your head."



"Where is he now?" Hopper set the box down at his feet to remove his coat. The Byers' home continued to be kept uncomfortably warm in his opinion.

"The boys all stayed the night here and Jonathon took them all back to the Wheeler's early this morning to sneak them in. I didn't want Karen to find out they left in the middle of the night without her knowing. Mostly I didn't want to have to explain how they ended up at my house the middle of the night without looking any more irresponsible than she already thinks I am."

"Karen Wheeler had an extra kid living in her basement for the better part of a week and didn't notice, so she's not one to talk."

Joyce laughed lightly in response and leaned against the back of the sofa. Neither sat down.

"Speaking of, where is El?"

"Cabin." he responded simply. Joyce noticed that he was beginning to take on Eleven's short speech patterns.

"You could have brought her, you know."

"Maybe next time."

"Ok well, it's an open invitation. For both of you," and she meant it sincerely.

"I told her I'd try to arrange for her to see the boys tomorrow," he said it like an offer.

"Good. Come over around lunch."

"Oh before I forget," he suddenly remembered the box at his feet, "I brought you a spare radio from the station. Next time you need something in the middle of the night, you don't have to waste time sending Jonathon to come get me."

"You could just get a phone," she teased.

"Not at the cabin. No phone lines way out there."

"I don't even know how to use this thing," she looked through the box as though something in it might just come to life and attack her.

"Don't worry, it's easy. And Will knows if you forget."

"You don't have to do that, Hop."

"I don't *have* to do much of anything," that was, after all, the advantage of being Jim Hopper, "But after the last couple years we've had, I *want* you to have the peace of mind knowing you can get ahold of me whenever."

Hopper had tired of the superficial tone this conversation had taken and decided to at least attempt to push Joyce into the darker waters she'd been avoiding. He was an expert in avoidance. "Now that we've established there are no kids around to put up a front for, you don't have to hold anything back," he had to duck in order to force eye contact. "How are you doing, *really*?"

"Better," she started and when he raised a disbelieving eyebrow she added, "And then I feel guilty for feeling better and then I feel worse."

"I get that. Feels like you're being disloyal."

"Yeah," she said softly, distantly.

"You're not, you know," even though he knew from personal experience that these sorts of reassurances and affirmations did nothing to exorcise the demons within.

"Yeah," she echoed even though she did not actually mean it.

He pulled her into a hug, rested his chin on her head and stroked her hair in the familiar sort of way that came from a long albeit disrupted shared history. Guilt and grief were assailants Hopper knew well. Assassins who had very nearly bested him before he found new purpose in his life. It killed him that he couldn't fight them for Joyce. He could fight his way into the Hawkins Lab to save Will, he could pick off inter-dimensional creatures like tin cans on a fence, he be the ever vigilant watchman, but he could not do a damn thing about this other than to wait it out. It was a helpless feeling and he hated it. Helplessness did not suit him.

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Hopper returned to the cabin shortly after sun down to find an unusually unsettled Eleven. Eleven typically came in one of two speeds: intense focus or apathetic disregard. Anything else meant trouble.

Hopper had exhausted his willingness to put up with anymore crap that day and called her out on it. "Ok kid. Something's bothering you, spill it."

Eleven paused, clearly considering her response. She finally settled on, "Promise you won't get mad."

"Well now I *know* something's up. What did you do?"

Eleven looked unsure and it occurred to him that the poor kid was on the verge of being paroled and didn't want to mess up. "New word of the day," he announced, "Amnesty. A-m-n-e-s-t-y. Look it up."

Eleven went through the now familiar routine of fetching the dictionary and locating the word in question. "A forgetting or overlooking of any past offenses," she read.

"That means as long as I hear it from you first, whatever it is, I'm not mad," he explained patiently.

"Amnesty?"

"That's right."

She nodded and confessed, "I was in the Void."

"Ok. And?"

"I wanted to know if you were on your way back," she explained.

"You know I hate that," he voice was taking on a growling tone.

"Amnesty," she insisted.

"I'm reminding myself," he said dryly.

"You and Mrs. Byers. Friends? Or..." she trailed off never having quite mastered the subtle vocabulary of friends vs friends friends vs *friends* and God help her the multiple meanings of "like" were completely beyond her capacity.

She was turning into a perceptive little thing, he had to give her that.

"That," he started still deciding what he was going to say, "is complicated."

"Complicated?"

"And also, none of your business." Clearly he decided he wasn't going to say much.

"But-"

"Nope," he immediately cut her off, "I refuse to have this conversation. Now, you asked for pizza, I brought you pizza, sit down and eat before it gets cold."

His tone made it very clear that he considered this topic closed.

But Eleven was nothing if not persistent.

## 10. Chapter 10

A/N Today's theme: the parallels between Eleven and Will.

Adding another A/N to respond to the review from my-secret-garden who is a lovely reviewer with the PM feature turned off which prevents me from replying directly. In answer to the question (paraphrased) if Brenner is not Eleven's biological father, why did he personally take on her care, my response is that's how he controlled her. When you think about it, if Eleven ever turned on him, he couldn't defend himself and he had to have known that. The only thing he could do was to manipulate her to the point where she wouldn't turn on him. If you notice in the flashbacks, she's rewarded with attention from Brenner. Until she meets Mike & Co., she has no comparison for genuine kindness, so whatever meager attention Brenner paid her was her definition of affection. We know that Brenner had to have directed the orderlies to lock Eleven in solitary, but she doesn't see him as the giver of punishments, she sees him as the only person who will rescue her. Which is why that flashback is one of the most jacked up scenes in the entire series, in my opinion. She is desperately screaming for her abuser to save her from the abuse he's actively inflicting on her because she was so successfully gaslighted into believing that Brenner loved her. That's pretty freaking dark.

PS, I also think Brenner is the bio dad, but for entirely different reasons. And this is why people should turn on their PMs because these are really fun conversations to have.

For the second too-early-for-a-weekend morning, Hopper was unwillingly pulled into consciousness. This time it was dispatch attempting to reach him over the radio. A tractor trailer carrying livestock had jack-knifed outside of town causing all hell to break loose. So much for his lazy Sunday morning. After promising he would be on scene within the hour, he contacted Joyce to make sure it was ok for Eleven to come over earlier than planned and to be there without him.

Eleven was very excited about the prospect of a visit to the Byers'

when no one was in mortal danger. She didn't even know what there was to do at the Byers' other than make a plan of attack, but she was looking forward to finding out. Hopper gave her parting instructions before he left the Blazer. "Curtains drawn, stay inside and if anyone other than the other kids come over, you stay out of sight, got it?"

"Don't be stupid," she summarized. "Got it."

Eleven liked Mrs. Byers. She called Eleven "sweetie" the way Hopper called her "kid." She greeted El with a big warm hug and then sent her and Will off with directions to "find something to do."

"C'mon," Will said, "I'll show you my room."

Will's room was littered with drawings and Eleven was fascinated. "Did you draw these?" she asked admiringly

"Yeah, I like drawing," Will said somewhat shyly, uncomfortable with praise from someone other than his mom. "I'm working on a comic book, wanna see?"

Eleven nodded eagerly as Will showed her the beginnings an illustrated version of one of the boys' Dungeons and Dragons campaign.

"Do you like to draw?" he asked.

"I don't know how," she admitted.

"I can show you a few things if you want," he offered and Eleven happily accepted.

Will proceeded to show Eleven a drawing book that broke everything down into simple shapes. She picked a dog to start with and diligently copied the example from the book with occasional coaching and encouragement from Will.

"Can I ask you something?" Will asked interrupting the quiet.

"Yes."

"Is it boring having to stay hidden?"

"Yes," Eleven said emphatically. Then as an after thought because perhaps she was being unfair to Hopper who was genuinely trying, "Less boring now, but still boring."

"You should make a list of things you're going to do once you can come out of hiding."

"Like what?" she asked. Truth be told, Eleven wasn't even sure what to imagine herself doing. It was like ordering from a menu you hadn't seen.

"What do *you* want to do?"

"Go to school and see friends," she answered quickly. The idea of choosing to do things as opposed to just accepting whatever was imposed upon her was a fairly new concept to Eleven, but school and friends were the gold standards of normal life as far as she was concerned.

"I thought you'd want to do something more interesting," Will responded casually.

"Friends *are* interesting," Eleven countered.

"I guess so."

"Can I ask you something?" Eleven asked after another a pause in the conversation.

"Sure."

"Is it interesting to go to school?"

It finally dawned on Will that what he considered normal and even tedious was still novel to Eleven and he didn't want to be unkind. "Usually it is," he allowed. "Sometimes people can be jerks and sometimes it's boring. I guess it's something I take for granted."

"Take for granted?"

"It means that you don't think about how good something is because it's just regular to you."

Eleven nodded in understanding. "When I go to school with you, I won't let them be jerks," she reassured Will. She was nothing if not a fierce protector of her friends. Friends were not something she would ever take for granted.

"The guys told me about what you did to Troy last year. That was pretty awesome," Will said with a grin.

"Mouth breather," Eleven also grinned.

Eleven had never really gotten to spend much one with Will on his own before now. He seemed willing to share information, so she decided to ask him a question that had bothered her for awhile but she didn't think Hopper would give her an objective answer.

"Ask you something?" she asked again, a little unsure.

"Yeah, sure."

"Your mom and Hopper took you to the lab. To see the doctor," she started.

"Dr Owens?" Will asked and Eleven nodded in confirmation. "What about him?"

"What did he do to you?" she lowered her voice instinctively. She hadn't been able to reconcile the fact that she knew Hopper and Mrs. Byers to be kind people with the fact that they voluntarily took Will to the lab for experiments.

"Um, well," Will wasn't expecting this question. "They put these little sensors on my head and Dr. Owens asked me questions."

"What happened if you answered wrong?"

"Nothing," Will said confused. "I mean, the questions they asked didn't have right or wrong answers."

And then, once again, understanding dawned on him. The lab Eleven experienced was a very different place, but she would have no way of knowing that.



"When you were in the lab, did they ask *you* questions?" he asked.

"Not usually," she shook her head. "They wanted me to do things. With my powers."

"What happened if you got it wrong?" he could guess her answer would not be positive given the way she had asked him the same question.

"The Bad men put me in a small, dark room. Sometimes for a long time," she said quietly.

"Jeez, I'm sorry for asking," Will said, suddenly worried that he had crossed a line. "I'm sure you'd rather forget."

"Its ok," she shrugged. "Do you not want people to ask about Upside Down so you can forget?"

"You know what's weird?" he asked and she shook her head. "People don't ask. Other than Dr Owens, anyway. It's like they're worried I can't handle it."

"Can you handle it?"

"I managed to live through it, I can handle talking about it."

"Yes," she nodded. "Same."

They returned again to their drawings and the sound of scratching pencils filled the room.

"I was in Upside Down after I killed the demogorgon," Eleven volunteered out of nowhere.

"I didn't know that's what happened to you. I knew you disappeared, but I didn't know where. How did you get out?"

"I found a hole. Into the school."

"Could you hear people while you were there?" Will had never had the opportunity to compare notes on the Upside Down with anyone before. His mom and Hopper had been there, but it wasn't the same.

"Just the Bad Men on the other side of the hole looking for me. I had to wait for them to leave."

"I could hear people," Will confided. "I kept trying to find ways to get them to hear me but I never found a hole to get through. I was ready to give up when you came and told me my mom was coming. I was really glad to see you. Thanks for doing that."

Eleven felt guilty accepting praise for a problem she had created.

"Do you know I'm the one who opened the gate and let the demogorgon out?" She asked cautiously, hoping it wouldn't make Will mad.

To her relief, he just answered, "Yeah, I knew that. How did it happen?"

"Papa made me find the demogorgon with my mind. I was so scared, I couldn't control my powers and it just..." she trailed off, lacking the proper words to describe what happened next.

"That's not your fault, then," Will said decisively. "That Papa guy shouldn't have ever put you up to something like that in the first place."

"You're not mad at me?"

"Are you kidding?" Will was incredulous. "You didn't do it on purpose. I understand what it's like to have something evil use you to hurt people."

"Mind Flayer made you do things," she said darkly.

"Yeah," Will still felt guilty thinking about it.

"Not your fault. You didn't do it on purpose."

"Yeah," he acknowledged, but he didn't really feel that way.

"The Mind Flayer is still down there," Eleven confided, knowing that Will could handle the information.

"I know. Sometimes I think I can feel him. Like he's watching me."

"Do you ever see the Upside Down anymore?" she asked.

"No, not anymore."

"That's good."

It took a long stretch of pencil scratching for the weight of that conversation to dissipate. Will took the opportunity to ask something he'd be wondering ever since he heard how Eleven had helped save him from the Upside Down.

"Can I ask you something else?"

"Yes," she said somewhat warily. She was afraid of the Mind Flayer and didn't really want to keep talking about him.

"How does it work when you find someone? I mean, in your head? Like when you found me."

She smiled because this was an easy question to answer. "I have to think about the person very hard and then I can visit them," she said simply.

"In the Upside Down?"

"No, the Void. It's black and quiet except for the person. It's almost nice," she added. Because depending on who you were looking for in the Void, it really could be kind of pleasant.

"Mike said he couldn't tell when you were visiting him last year, but I could see you and hear you when you found me in the Upside Down," this was something Will had been puzzling over for months.

"I don't know why," Eleven confessed with a shrug. "Only you and Mama and the demogorgon could see me."

Whatever the common thread was between those three, Eleven did not know it.

"How do you do it? Like, do you need a pool?"

"Not anymore, I'm better at it now. Do you want to see?" she asked him with just a hint of mischief glinting in her eyes.

"Yeah," Will responded excitedly.

"Who should I visit?"

"You could see if Hopper's having any luck so we'll know when he'll be back," Will suggested.

"No," Eleven shook her head, "Hopper doesn't like it. He says it's nosy and then he does this:" She gave the lowest, most gravely growl a 13 year old girl could produce and the impersonation sent Will into fits of laughter.

"I could visit your brother," she suggested.

"Oh no," Will shot that idea down immediately. "He's with Nancy and no one wants to see that. Do one of the guys."

"Ok, that's easy. I need a blindfold and something with static. Like a TV or a radio."

Will handed her a black t-shirt she was able to fold into a suitable blindfold and tuned the stereo in his room until he found static.

From Will's perspective, nothing much was going on. Eleven just sat there, doing nothing until Dustin's voice was projected into Will's walkie talkie "Son of a bitch! Son of a bitch!"

Eleven removed the blindfold and wiped the small trickle of blood from her nose. "Dustin says that a lot," Eleven said knowingly.

"That is so cool," Will was impressed.

"Ok, you don't have to answer this one if you don't want to because it's kind of personal," Will was having too much fun with this question game to stop now. "You know who your mom is, right?"

"Yes," Eleven responded.

"Do you know who your dad is? I mean, like, your real dad?"

"I don't think so," she responded thoughtfully. "Papa said he was, but he lied about a lot so I don't know." And truthfully she did not. Despite what the paper said and regardless of what he was now, Hopper was not her father when she was born. She doubted Brenner was her father, at least she hoped he wasn't. It would be nice to have no connection to him at all.

"Do you know who your dad is?" Eleven asked. She'd never heard anything about Will having a dad and wondered why.

"Yeah, I know who he is, I just don't like him," Will stated matter of factly having long since gotten over the hurt of parental rejection.

"Is he a Bad Man?"

"Well, I mean, he hasn't murdered anyone or kidnapped people to conduct illegal experiments on them or anything, but he's definitely an asshole. He doesn't like me either so that works out just fine."

"Why doesn't he like you?" Will was a perfectly nice boy in her opinion, she couldn't imagine why his father wouldn't like him.

"I don't know," Will shrugged. "He doesn't like Jonathan either. Maybe because we're not like him. My parents got divorced a few years ago. He moved to Indianapolis and he uses that as an excuse not to see us. But he never really wanted anything to do with us before then."

"Will?" Eleven asked tentatively.

"Yeah?"

"You said Jonathan was with Nancy and no one wanted to see that. Why?"

"Because they're supposed to be working on some project for school, but they're dating now so they're probably off somewhere making out."

"Making out?" Eleven was confused.

"It's like kissing for a long time a lot of times in a row."

"Ah," she said as understanding dawned on her. She had seen that on TV but did not know the word. "No one else will explain these things to me."

"Who are you asking?"

"Mike and Hopper."

"You're asking the wrong people," Will explained. "You make Mike nervous because he really really likes you, so he's no help. Hopper's basically your dad now and no parent wants to talk about that sort of thing with their kids."

"But you're my friend," she clarified, "so you can just tell me."

"Yeah sure. Ask away."

"What does 'really really like' mean?"

Will thought for a minute about how to explain. "Liking someone is feeling good about them, right? But there are different kinds of feeling good about someone. So Jonathan likes me. I'm his brother, I'm his friend, he likes to hang out with me, that kind of thing. So he likes me in a friend way, but he likes Nancy in a boyfriend/girlfriend kind of way. More than friends."

Eleven thought back to Mike's attempt to explain when he asked her to go to the Snow Ball the first time.

"A sister can be a friend..." Eleven began thinking aloud.

"Yes," he confirmed.

"...but not more than friends."

"No, that's definitely wrong. It might even be illegal."

She digested this for a moment. "Jonathan and Nancy are more than friends."

"Yes."

"Nancy and Steve?" she asked.

"Used to be more than friends, now friends."

Eleven thought she was finally understanding.

"I asked Hopper what kind of friend your mom was. He said it was none of my business."

Will laughed. "Yeah, I'm not sure even *they* know."

## 11. Chapter 11

**A/N This is a lot longer than I thought it was going to be and it feels a bit dense to me, but it's resisting any sort of leavening so there you are.**

At breakfast on Friday morning, Hopper laid out the trip itinerary for Eleven. "I'm going to come home right after work and we'll drive out to your Aunt Becky's. I want you packed and ready to go when I get home so we can be on the road before 6:00 pm. We'll get there late, but that will let us drive at night which is less of a risk, especially in and around Hawkins. Becky said we can sleep at her house tonight so we'll spend all day Saturday there and drive back Saturday night. Sound good?"

"I want to go to the movies," she responded. Eleven had been thinking about what Will had said about making a list of things she wanted to do once she came out of hiding and she had gotten some ideas. Of course Hopper had no idea she'd been thinking about any of this and so her non-responsive response came out of left field.

"The movies?" Hopper asked incredulously, "As in a theater?"

"In the car," she clarified. She darted away from the table to grab the driving Atlas from the coffee table and brought it back to show Hopper. "See? I saw one on TV and I looked at the maps. We can see a movie on the way back."

"I'll think about it," he told her in a way that made it impossible for her to tell whether he was being sincere or putting her off.

"*Really* think about it?"

"Yes, I will *really* think about it. A regular movie theater would be out of the question, but a drive in is a possibility. You didn't give me much of a heads up."

"Can we eat dinner at a restaurant?"

"That's pushing it."



"Not in Hawkins," she clarified.

"I assumed not in Hawkins, it's still pushing it."

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Hopper and Eleven left Hawkins that evening in the relative safety of darkness. Eleven used Hopper's radio to signal to Mike (Marco), Mike signaled back almost immediately (Polo) and Hopper secretly counted the miles until they would be out of range.

"Hey kid," he started, looking to put her mind to something other than the Wheeler boy, "there's something I've been meaning to talk to you about."

"What?"

"You need to decide what name you want to go by."

"Everyone calls me El," she said simply.

"That can change. It may take some getting used to, but that shouldn't drive your choice. Your Aunt Becky knows you as Jane, your birth certificate says Jane, but plenty of people don't go by their given name, so it's up to you."

"What should I do?"

"You should do what feels right to you. This one is totally your choice." She couldn't go to school as Eleven, but Elle was a perfectly inconspicuous name and could easily be passed off as a middle name.

"I want to think about it," she said slowly after a lengthy pause.

"That's fine. You have plenty of time."

"Mama named me Jane," she explained.

"Yeah, so I can see why you'd want to keep that."

"And Papa named me Eleven," her voice darkened. Replacing her

name with an experiment number was one of the many ways Brenner had dehumanized her. The more distance she got from the lab, the more she really started to understand just how diabolical Brenner was and it equally angered and pained her.

"But," she reasoned, "Mike named me El."

If it came down to a contest between the emotional attachment to the name her mother had given her and the name Mike Wheeler had given her, Hopper was fairly certain he wasn't going to have to get used to Jane any time soon, but he wasn't going to say any of that aloud. "Well, like I said, whatever you decide, we'll make it work. It's your choice."

She nodded contemplatively. Choices were still something she was getting used to having.

The cab of the Blazer returned to companionable silence, as Hopper watched the road ahead and El looked out her window straining her eyes for glimpses of stars or even lighted windows. Travel at night might be safer, but the scenery was lacking.

At one point, Eleven pointed out her window, "What's that?"

Hopper slowed slightly and ducked so he could see out the passenger side window. "That looks to be some sort of storage lot for carnival rides. Not much call for that sort of thing in February."

"Carnival?"

"Remember that movie Grease?" Hopper felt that if he had to suffer through that monstrosity, at least he ought to be able to get some good out of it. "At the end, with all the rides? That's what a carnival is. Except no one sings. Or flies away in a car."

"Can we go?"

"There's a state fair every summer in Indianapolis, so not this year, but possibly next year."

"Do you think the Bad Men are watching *carnivals*?" the final word laced with sarcasm.

"It's not the Bad Men I'm worried about on that one, kid. We'd have a hell of a time explaining ourselves to anyone we might run into from Hawkins."

"Fine," she grumbled before returning to scanning the darkness out her window. "I'll put it on my list."

"What list?" he asked, amused.

"Will asked what I wanted to do when I don't have to hide. So I'm making a list."

"What do you have so far?"

"See friends, go to school, see a movie in a theater, eat at a restaurant, go shopping with Nancy, go to the arcade and go to a carnival." She quickly ticked off the items using only her fingers to jog her memory, making it clear this was something she thought about frequently.

Hopper wondered if there would ever come a day when he would no longer be caught off guard by just how many of the little things El had missed out on. Her bucket list included eating at a restaurant, for God's sake.

"Are you mad?" she asked tentatively. Evidently, he had not hidden his reaction as well as he thought he had.

"No," he said reflexively and then, "Well actually yes, but not at you."

"At who?"

"Let's get dinner," he responded, never actually answering the question.

"At a restaurant?" she brightened.

"Yeah, kid, at a restaurant."

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It was approaching midnight when they finally got to the Ives' residence.

First there had been the restaurant. It was only a little hole in the wall pizza place, but it contained a table version of Pac Man that Eleven desperately wanted to try, so Hopper gave her all the quarters in his pockets. There was also a claw machine that he warned her was damn near impossible to win before giving her a dollar to change for quarters. She won herself a stuffed bear on her final try. "Cheater," he remarked quietly after watching the toy levitate ever so slightly into the wire claw before it closed.

Then they had to stop for gas and the owner of the service station had a box of kittens labeled "free." Eleven hadn't even had the chance to say anything before Hopper told her no. It required several more no's and nearly twenty minutes to extricate Eleven from the box of mewling fluffiness.

When they finally turned into the drive, Hopper reminded Eleven, "What's the first thing you're going to do?"

"Apologize," she responded stiffly.

"That's right. Now," he continued, "rules while we're here: stay inside unless I'm with you. Your aunt is not an acceptable substitute, understand? If anyone comes to the house, stay out of sight. And also, eat whatever you're given and don't complain even if it's peas."

"Hate peas," she said ruefully.

"Then swallow them whole and you won't have to taste them. Manners, remember?"

"Hate manners."

Hopper ignored this and walked around to the back of the Blazer to grab their respective over night bags from the back of the vehicle.

Unlike her last visit where Becky had refused to open the door, she had clearly been keeping watch for them because she walked out onto the front porch moments after they arrived and held out her arms to welcome Eleven with a hug. "Jane! I'm so glad you're here!"

Eleven returned the greeting hug but responded only with "Where's Mama?"

When it looked as though Eleven was going to attempt to dodge the apology altogether, Hopper placed his hand on her shoulder as a reminder. "Aunt Becky?" El asked, taking the hint.

"Yes, Jane?"

"I'm sorry I took money out of your purse and made you worry."

"Oh honey, it's ok. I'm not mad. I'm just glad that you're safe and sound, ok? Your mama's asleep now, so you can see her in the morning."

Eleven was disappointed, but moved into house taking visual inventory as she went.

"Hi Jim, you two are getting here later than I thought you would be."

"Hello Becky. Sorry, I hope we aren't keeping you up."

"No, not at all," she reassured.

Becky turned her attention to Eleven who was looking at her mother's chair, soaking in the room with something approaching reverence. "I made up your room for you, Jane. I haven't gotten around to removing the baby stuff out of there, but maybe we can do that soon, yeah?"

"Yes," Eleven said absently and then remembering manners added, "Thank you."

"Ok kid," Hopper's voice broke through her reverie, "why don't you head on off to bed? You had a long day." By which he meant he had had a long day. She only nodded in response.

She took the overnight bag he held out for her and while she leaned in for a hug whispered "thank you." He hugged her back and whispered "you're welcome."

"Night, Aunt Becky," she said with a little waive.

"Goodnight, Jane."

The adults watched her disappear up the stairs and then Becky wordlessly gestured towards the kitchen table.

"Can I get you something?" because in the mid-west, when someone comes to your house, you offer them something no matter what time of day it is.

"No, thanks, I'm good. Thanks again for putting us up. this is real important to her."

"Of course," Becky retrieved the cigarette resting on the edge of the ashtray that she had clearly been smoking before they arrived. "She should be with what little family she has left, right?"

Hopper resisted the urge to ask her what the hell she meant by that thinking that perhaps the long drive had made him overly antagonistic. Instead he settled for "She definitely wants to keep you two in her life, so I'll make sure that happens."

"How is she doing? What has she been up to?" She leaned in. He leaned back. He was far better at this game.

"Mostly she's working to be prepared to start school next year. She has a lot of catching up to do, but she's making good progress. Her math should be on grade level when she starts, anyway."

"She barely speaks," Becky noted.

"That'll happen when you're brought up as a science experiment instead of a human being. She's making gains, little by little. Spending time with her friends is really helpful because they never shut up so she gets a lot of practice."

"I've been thinking about what you said a couple weeks ago, about her having to stay hidden for another year."

"More like nine months now, but yeah, unfortunately, that's where we're at."

"Don't you think she'd be better off somewhere away from Hawkins?"

Where no one is paying any attention?"

"By which you mean here." Because Hopper was not one to skirt around the point.

"Well, yes."

"Look, Becky, no offense, but you really have no idea who or what you're up against. These people know exactly who Terry is. I found you last year with a single phone call, they wouldn't even have to do that."

"I'd wouldn't let anyone hurt her." He congratulated himself for refraining from laughing at her naivete.

"*She* wouldn't let anyone hurt her, that's not what I'm worried about. Do you know that she can kill someone with a flick of her head? She won't be able to keep you, Terry and herself safe at the same time. If they came here to get her, it would be a blood bath and she'd be the only one to walk away but she'd be even more traumatized than the poor kid already is. I'll bring her as often as I can without drawing attention, but you have to see that she can't stay here."

The air went out of both the room and the argument at that point and they sat in awkward silence until Becky noted he must be tired and showed him the guestroom.

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"Hopper," the familiar whisper woke him.

"What?"

"I don't want to live here."

He groaned, rubbed his eyes and flipped on the bedside lamp. "Have you, by any chance, been eavesdropping again?"

Eleven's silence and large eyes confirmed his suspicion.

"Seriously, El, you have *got* to stop doing that. You're just working yourself up over nothing."

"I didn't mean to. I forgot my tapes in the car and you talk loud. You won't leave me, will you?" the plaintive insecurity in her voice was enough to break your heart...except in the middle of the night. He was far too tired for that.

"Listen to me. I would never leave you. Ever. And your Aunt Becky wouldn't take you. She's just lonely and she misses your mom. And then here you come and it's like she can have a bit of her sister back. I understand why she wants you here, but that doesn't mean it's going to happen." *Like to see her try*, he thought. "Now, are you going to be able to sleep?"

"Yes," but she didn't make any attempt to move. Clearly, there was still something on her mind. "Hopper?"

"Yeah, El?"

"Will Aunt Becky be sad if I don't stay?"

"A few months ago, she didn't know you existed. Even now she's barely spent any time with you. It's not about you, kid, it's about the idea of you. She'll get used to the idea of having you for a little while every few months and she'll be happy because it's more than she had before. I promise we can talk about all this as much as you want on the drive home. But if I don't get some sleep tonight, I'm going to be a mess tomorrow night while I'm trying to drive. So if you want any chance of fitting a drive in movie into our trip home..."

"I'll go back to sleep," she said quickly.

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Eleven woke up Saturday morning to her bedside lamp flickering. "Mama," she said aloud into the empty room. She quickly rifled through her overnight bag to find the black blindfold and ran skidding down the stairs. She found Terry in her rocking chair, staring off into space repeating the words that Eleven now



understood were a recounting of her birth, abduction and Terry's failed attempt to rescue her. A never ending loop of desperation.

She turned the TV to static, sat cross legged on the floor and tied her blindfold. It took her only seconds to reach the void, but unlike last time when Terry stopped rocking long enough to make eye contact with Eleven, she continued to rock and repeat the same words over and over. Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the right. Four to the left. 450.

Eleven removed the blindfold, disappointed tears welling in her eyes.

"What's the matter, kid?" Hopper asked as she flopped herself down at the breakfast table.

"Mama wanted to talk but when I visited her, she just had the same words. No memories."

"Ok, let's back this up a bit. You said, she wanted to talk, how do you know that?"

"The light," Eleven said simply as though this ought to make sense.

"Last time she was here, a light flickered and when Jane got close, the next light flickered until it led her to Terry," Becky explained.

Hopper thought for a moment. "Terry was part of MK-Ultra as a participant before she got pregnant, right?"

"Um, yeah, probably for about a year?" Becky responded.

"Last time I was here, you said something about LSD and sensory deprivation tanks. Did she ever say anything about developing any abilities of her own?"

"Terry said a lot of things that sounded so crazy, to be honest, I sort of stopped listening."

Hopper turned again to Eleven. "El, this is very important: how do you know that's your mom making the lights do that?"

"Her nose."

"She gets a nose bleed?" he clarified and she nodded in response. At least it was Terry making the lights flicker and not God only knows what sort of monster lurking in the shadows.

"Ok, I've got an idea. I need a couple lamps."

In rather short order, they had positioned a table in front of Terry with two lamps. A piece of paper with a large "YES" written on it was balanced on one and a similar piece of paper with "NO" written on it was balanced on the other.

"You're going to have to go in there and explain how this works ok?" Hopper explained to Eleven and she nodded. "This is the yes lamp, this is the no lamp. Maybe she can answer questions even if she can't talk."

Once again, El tied on her blindfold and sat still and silent on the floor until she was in the Void. The table with the lamps was also visible in front of Terry. She placed her hand on her mother's and whispered in her ear, "Mama? Can you make the lights go? This light for yes, this light for no. Do you understand?" The yes lamp in the Void flickered.

"She's ready," Eleven said removing the blindfold.

"So what, we just *talk* to her now?" Becky asked. Eleven nodded. "Um, ok. Terry, are you there?"

The yes lamp flickered.

"Holy shit," Becky whispered.

"Have you been able to hear me this whole time?"

Again, the yes lamp flickered.

"Ask her to do a pattern so you know it's not just coincidence," Hopper prompted.

"Terry, can you show us yes, no, no, yes?"

The lamps flickered in the proper order and Becky couldn't stop the

tears. "Oh my God, it's really her! This whole time, she was in there."

Terry couldn't answer many questions before she tired, but the knowledge that she was aware and listening was exciting. Hopper made himself scarce and allowed Eleven and Becky the opportunity to spend time with Terry and with each other before it was time to leave.

"So," he asked as they pulled onto the main road, "did you have a good time?"

Eleven thought for a long while before answering slowly. "I'm glad Mama can talk with the lamps. Maybe Aunt Becky won't be so lonely without me."

"Maybe by the time we come back, your mom will be even stronger and be able to talk for longer," he said optimistically.

"Maybe." She rested her forehead on the window.

"Ok kid, something's bothering you. Out with it."

"Seeing Mama makes me happy but also sad," she explained.

"We call that bittersweet."

"Like ambiguous? Good and bad?"

"Something like that."

She returned to looking out her window in silent contemplation.

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They did manage to make it to a drive in theater on their way back. Eleven was disappointed to learn that The Breakfast Club had nothing to do with breakfast, but was about high school students in detention which Hopper explained was like being grounded, but at school. "But being grounded is boring," she was confused how anyone could make a movie out of such a scenario. Given that he didn't actually want to

see that movie anyway, Hopper just shrugged as though he also did not understand that as a premise for a movie.

She settled on Witness because she felt like she could at least relate to the story. Mostly it was exciting to have a new adventure, particularly an adventure that involved popcorn that was so salty, it left red bumps on her tongue.

By the end, she could barely keep her eyes open. At Hopper's suggestion, she laid down across the backseat and slept for the remainder of the ride home.

They couldn't have been in range more than five minutes when the signal "Marco" came over the radio. Hopper regretted ever starting that stupid code and signaled back s-l-e-e-p-i-n-g.

## 12. Chapter 12

**A/N Skipping ahead a bit to early March because spring break is a good excuse to get all the kids together.**

"Mike says there's no school next week," Eleven informed Hopper after Mike's next Saturday visit.

"Is that so?"

"Yes. Spring break." Mike had explained that spring break was like Christmas Break and Thanksgiving break except that there was no holiday involved, just time off from school.

"I take it that means you want more visits," Hopper guessed.

"Yes."

"Well. I'll see what I can do, but I still have to be at the station even when the other kids aren't in school so you can't think of this like it's a week of Saturdays."

"Do you *have* to be here?" she asked irritated.

"Is that *actually* a question?" he echoed her tone.

Eleven rolled her eyes in response.

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As school let out for the day, most students flooded the hallways anxious to leave the building as soon as possible. A select few sought the refuge of the AV room as though it was their own private office.

"What are we planning for next week?" Dustin asked, absently fiddling with the box of spare parts Mr. Clark had left for their amusement.

"As long as it involves me spending as little time at home as possible,

I don't care what we're doing," Max said.

"You ok?" Lucas asked, concerned.

"I'm fine," she said dismissively, "I just don't want to spend a whole week with Billy."

"I thought he'd quit being a dick to you after you almost neutered him with Steve's bat," Dustin couldn't contain a grin at the memory.

"Yeah, well, turns out I'm not nearly as scary without the bat. Don't worry about it, I can handle it."

"Hey, Will?" Mike asked, "You think your mom would mind if we hung out at your house?"

"Will's house is too far," Lucas complained.

"Will's house is the only other approved location," Mike reminded him.

"Oh. Yeah."

"I'm sure my mom wouldn't care," Will answered Mike's question, ignoring Lucas. "Actually, I'm sure she'd be thrilled because then I'd be home."

"She still freaking out?" Mike asked sympathetically.

"Always."

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The week of spring break, Max did, indeed, find herself stuck in a house with Billy. She couldn't provide a reasonable explanation for sneaking out and then staying out all night the night they'd fought the demodogs and so she'd been on a pretty short leash ever since. She could tolerate things when she had an escape like school, but being in the house all day long was unbearable.

They hadn't even made it through breakfast on Monday morning without everything going to shit. This week was going to be a nightmare. Max tried to tune out the noise of the argument taking place in the living room. The walls were thick enough to make the words indistinct, but they didn't block the sounds of Neil shouting. She would feel bad for Billy if he weren't also such a douche. He and Neil were two of a kind and as far as she was concerned, they deserved each other. She pulled on her headphones and laid on her bed determined to drown them out when she saw the bottoms of Billy's shoes through the gap at the bottom of her door as he walked down the hall. Process of elimination, if Neil wasn't targeting Billy, there was only one other option.

Without giving any advance thought to what she was going to do when she got out there, Max flew off her bed and ran towards the living room just in time to see her stepfather shouting into her mother's face while he held her by the upper arms and then shove her away so that she fell into the sofa.

"Hey, asshole! Leave her alone," Max shouted, surprising even herself with her boldness.

She saw the back of Neil's hand coming at her as though it was in slow motion, but she couldn't react fast enough to avoid it. When he made contact, the force was enough to knock her off balance and she stumbled backwards into the door jam. Grabbing a fistful of her hair at the crown of her head, he twisted her head so that she forced her to make eye contact.

"You're going to apologize and tell me that you will mind your own business in the future." His voice was cold and deadly. She'd seen him do this exact same thing to Billy but Neil had never turned on his step-daughter. Of course, she'd never stood up to him and called him an asshole before, so they were in uncharted waters.

"No."

"Excuse me?" He twisted his grip on her hair and Max bit back a whimper. She wasn't going to give him the satisfaction.

"I said no."

"Wrong answer. Try again," He twisted again and her scalp was on fire.

"Let go of me!"

"Say it!" He shouted into her face.

"NO!" Max shouted back.

Neil shifted his position giving Max her opening and she took it. She brought her knee square up into Neil's groin and that gave her the chance she needed to twist out of his grip and run out the front door.

She ran until she felt like her lungs were going to explode and the stitch in her side became unbearable. The adrenaline ebbed from her system and she realized just how badly she'd screwed herself. She was at least a 20 minute walk from town, she hadn't taken the time to get a coat, it was starting to snow and eventually she was going to have to go back. "Shit," she muttered. And then for good measure, "shit, shit, shit, SHIT!"

Heading back immediately was out of the question so rather than stand there and freeze, Max started to walk towards town. While she was walking, she replayed the incident over in her mind and realized that her mother hadn't made a move to protect her. She sat, frozen, watching but not acting. That realization hurt more than anything Neil had done.

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By the time she'd made it into town, Max was miserable, frozen and desperate. She knew everyone except her had gone to Will's house, so she fished a quarter out of her jeans and hoped they were there. Jonathan answered the phone and Max breathed a sigh of relief that, not only was someone home, that someone had a car and a license.

"Hey, Jonathan. Um it's Max."

"Hi Max, who are you calling for?"



"Actually, I was kind of hoping you could pick me up."

"Are you ok?"

Jonathan's question triggered a cacophony of concerned questions: "Is she ok?" "What happened?" "Did Billy do something?"

"Guys!" Jonathan shouted over them, "I can't hear!"

"Max, where are you?" he asked returning to the phone.

"Well right now I'm at a payphone, but I'm going to go wait in the library. I just...I'll explain later, but I can't go home right now so I need to kill some time."

"Alright, I'll figure out how to come get you. Just hang tight for a while, ok?"

"What's going on?" Lucas asked the moment Jonathan hung up the phone.

"I don't know," Jonathan said, "She said she'd explain when I picked her up, but she says she can't go home right now."

"So what are you waiting for?" Mike asked, "Go get her!"

"I can't leave you guys here unsupervised," Jonathan responded.

"So take us," Will suggested.

"I can't take her anywhere else," Jonathan indicated Eleven.

"I'll stay here, you take them with you," Eleven felt this was a very simple problem to solve.

"I'm not supposed to leave you alone," Jonathan countered.

"Let's be honest here," Lucas said, "you're just not supposed to leave her alone with Mike."

"Yeah," Mike agreed, "so if I go with you, it's not a problem."

"I stay home alone *all* the time," Eleven assured him.

"You stay at *your* home alone all the time," Jonathan clarified.

"Will can stay too," Eleven suggested, "then I'm not alone."

"Yeah," Will said, "I can stay too."

"Somehow I don't think that's what the Chief had in mind," Jonathan was trying to think while responding to the barrage of arguments. "Just let me make a call."

It was a number Jonathan committed to memory on the off chance he needed it, but he'd yet to actually use it.

"Hello?"

"Steve? I need a favor"

"Jonathan? Yeah sure, man, what is it?"

"I got a call from Max. I don't know what's up, but she needs someone to pick her up and I'm supposed to be staying here with my brother and his friends."

"Why can't you just leave them? They're not babies." Shitheads, maybe, but plenty old enough to be left home alone in Steve's opinion.

"No," Jonathan said meaningfully, "but one of them has an over protective and heavily armed father."

"Oh, that one."

"Yeah, that one."

"Alright," Steve said reluctantly, "I'll go get her. Where is she?" He figured it was better to volunteer to go pick up the lone wayward nerd than volunteer to chaperone the other five.

"Thanks, man. She's at the library. Bring her here, we'll sort her out."

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Steve parked in front of the library and walked in the building for the first time in years. It took him several minutes to find a disheveled red head doing her best to hide behind a book.

"Hey, Random Girl," he greeted her.

"What are you doing here?" Max was expecting Jonathan.

"Jonathan couldn't leave so he asked me to pick you up."

"Well, thanks for coming to get me."

"Nice shiner," Steve commented.

"Is it that bad already?" Max had her fair share of skating injuries and any bruise that was visible in less than an hour was going to be bad. Fantastic.

"Yeah, it's pretty bad. Get your coat and I'll take you to the Byers'."

"I don't have a coat," she said standing up to leave.

"Well it's freezing outside, so take mine."

"Thanks, Steve," Max took the coat. She wouldn't have admitted it, but she was still freezing.

"Don't mention it."

They made their way out to Steve's car and he immediately cranked up the heat. The snow was falling faster and heavier and Steve absently wondered how well roads were even plowed out near the Byers'.

"Was that gift from Billy?" Steve asked gesturing to Max's bruised cheek and blackening eye.

"No, shockingly. Billy's dad, Neil," Max responded and then added, "I *might* have called him an asshole and made him lose his shit."

"Pretty ballsey," Steve said impressed.

"Pretty stupid, actually. I'm going to have to go home eventually and

when I do, I'm dead meat."

"I used to take off and try to figure out how long was long enough for my dad to cool off but not so long that it gave him something else to be pissed about."

"What's the magic middle ground?"

"Don't know," Steve shrugged, "Never found it. Just, I get it, you know? I've been there. So why'd you do it?"

"He went after my mom and I didn't even think, I just reacted. Of course, when he went after me, she did jack shit about it, so that was an eye opener."

## 13. Chapter 13

Hopper's instruction to stay away from windows was ignored completely as Eleven and the boys took turns monitoring the front window for signs of Steve and Max; anxiously awaiting an explanation of what had driven the typically stoic Max to call for help. She wasn't two seconds in the door when they noticed her increasingly obvious injury.

"Holy shit," Lucas exclaimed, "What happened?"

"I got in a fight with my stepdad," Max had mentally prepared herself for an onslaught of questions, but that didn't mean she was particularly interested in answering them.

"About...?"

"He went after my mom, I called him an asshole so he went after me," she hoped that if she downplayed her responses enough, the others might not make such a big deal over it.

"We should call Hopper," Dustin declared.

"No, we should definitely *not* call Hopper," Max said, annoyed. No matter what sort of special relationship their group had with Hopper, he was not going to go along with Max's plan to just let everything blow over.

"Why not?"

"Because it'll only make things worse. I just need to give things time to cool off a little before I go back."

"You can stay here as long as you need to," Jonathan offered, "but that's a shit plan."

"Can we please just not make a big deal out of this? I'm just gonna call and let my mom know I'm ok."

"Is she going to send Billy out here looking for you?" Steve asked knowing the Byers' house was on the short list of places Max was

likely to be found.

"I'll tell her I'm alive, not where I am. And no because neither one of them can drive in the snow. Advantages of coming from California."

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Despite universal misgivings, there was no practical way to push Max to do anything about her Neil problem. Instead they spent the day staging Atari and card game tournaments, watching movies and generally doing a whole lot of nothing. The day slipped past quickly and by the time late afternoon rolled around, Max and Eleven were so caught up in their game of speed that they didn't even notice anyone walking into the Byers' home.

"Why is there another car here?" Hopper demanded, startling Max and giving Eleven the opening to play several cards.

"So much for not calling Hopper," Dustin muttered.

"Steve brought Max over," Eleven explained, never looking away from the game. "Why are you here?"

"He drove me home," Joyce answered on Hopper's behalf. Max took advantage of Eleven's distraction to finish her hand and win the game. "My car would never have made it through the snow." Eleven hoped Hopper didn't realize how little attention she had been paying. She has no desire to sit through yet another lecture on being aware of her surroundings.

"Shit," Steve finally looked out the window for the first time in hours and realized both how late it was and the fact that nearly a foot of snow had fallen over the course of the day, "I didn't realize it was getting so bad. I should head out."

"You're staying put unless you have four-wheel drive. There are enough people stranded as it is," and then Hopper noticed Max for the first time. "What the hell happened here?"

"It's nothing," she said reflexively.

"Doesn't look like nothing," Hopper responded sarcastically. Assuming Max wasn't going to be particularly forthcoming with information, he instead turned to Jonathan, "When did this happen?"

"She called me to come get her about nine this morning."

"Why didn't you call me earlier?"

"Because I told them not to," Max disliked being talked about as though she wasn't there more than she disliked talking. "I'm not reporting it."

"Mind telling me why you don't want to report this?" he decided she didn't need to know just yet that being a minor meant she didn't have a choice in the matter.

"Because we've been through this before. Cops get called, my mom protects him and refuses to press charges so nothing happens. No, wait, scratch that, worse than nothing happens. Neil is even cockier because he got away with it. *Again*."

"I can take care of him," Eleven offered.

"Not that I wouldn't love to see that," Lucas said, "because trust me, I totally would, but that's kind of the opposite of laying low."

"He wouldn't see me," Eleven clarified. "He could just... have an accident."

"Ok, psycho," Steve told her, "no one is giving you a lift to go put a hit on someone."

"She's not a psycho," Make retorted, "Don't call her that."

"I wouldn't *kill* him," Eleven said derisively. She knew what a "hit" was and she was at least mildly offended.

"Alright," Hopper snapped pinching the bridge of his nose. He pointed to Max, "You? Sit. The rest of you? Out. Now."

The teens filed out amid grumbles and eye rolls that Hopper ignored. Joyce, meanwhile, settled down at the table next to Max. "You're not

kicking me out of my own kitchen, Hop," she said in response to his silent irritation. Hopper knew there was no point in arguing the issue with Joyce, so he just took a seat at the table opposite Max.

"It's not up to your mother whether to press charges on this."

"If you go out there and arrest him, then what? Honestly?"

"He'll have to bond out, so he'll sit in holding for a night. Two if the snow shuts down the courthouse tomorrow."

"And then he'll get a slap on the wrist," Max finished for him.

"And then he'll end up with probation if he doesn't have any priors," Hopper reluctantly clarified. Kid wasn't wrong, it was completely inadequate.

"Otherwise known as a slap on the wrist. If I rat him out, he'll do what he needs to do to put on a show and then as soon as no one's looking over his shoulder, it'll all hit the fan. No, thank you."

"Look, kid, I can't ignore this-"

"-Sure you can, you just won't," she interrupted sullenly.

"What I can do is make sure Neil understands that I'm a bigger asshole than he is and that I'm always looking over his shoulder."

Max wondered whether having Hopper intimidate Neil would have a longer affect than the nail studded bat had had on Billy. She hoped like hell it would, but she had no faith.

"And when it gets worse?" She made one last ditch effort to guilt him out of his decision.

"Then you call me. Immediately." He didn't try to all her out of her conviction that his intervention was going to make matters worse. It might, but these were the sorts of situations that eventually escalated anyway.

"Ok guys," Joyce announced to the boys effectively ending Hopper and Max's conversation , "if you want to stay the night, I need you to



call your parents and get permission. Hop's heading into town and he'll take anyone home who needs it."

"You're welcome to stay," Jonathan told Steve.

"You know, I think I've had enough togetherness for one day. But thanks for the offer. You wanna escape all this?"

"I should probably stay and help my mom."

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No one expected Hopper to return quickly. The roads were a mess, he had to take Steve Harrington home before he could drive out to Max's house and he wasn't even technically done with his work day when he took time out to give Joyce a ride home. Even without the additional distraction of dealing with Neil Hargrove, there were dozens of car accidents around town and stranded motorists to deal with. It was the sort of day that would have been a long one no matter what. Right before he left Joyce's house, he pointed to Eleven, "Do not -," and before he could finish, she finished for him "I won't try to spy." And then as soon as the door was closed and he was safely out of earshot, she muttered to herself, "Kill joy."

Hopper pulled up to the Max's house with the hopes of getting a statement from Neil Hargrove that wouldn't require the District Attorney to depend solely on Max. The District Attorney was an older man who felt these sorts of things were "family problems" and were best worked out behind closed doors. If he had an excuse to toss a domestic case, he always did.

"Something I can help you with, Officer...?" a middle aged man answered, presumably Neil Hargrove.

"Chief Jim Hopper," he simultaneously introduced himself and corrected Neil. Hopper knew that in a pissing match, rank mattered.

"Right. Something I can help you with?"

"Yeah, I'm letting you know I ran into your step-daughter. Figured

you'd be wanting to know where she is, what with the storm and all," Hopper kept his tone almost congenial.

"And where is she?"

"She wound up out at the Byers' place. I was out there on other business and she and I got to chatting."

"Look, I don't know what story she told you, but that girl is out of control," Neil became suddenly defensive.

Hopper maintained his look of neutrality and merely asked, "That so?"

"Thirteen years old and she's already sneaking out of the house. She'll lie to cover her ass, but she spends all her time with a group of boys so you can just do the math."

It was a struggle to not roll his eyes at attempt to equate hanging out with this group of boys in particular to promiscuity. It was a friendship that carried a risk of possession or being eaten alive, but little else.

"Is that what happened this morning?" Hopper pressed.

"What about this morning?"

"Story I got is she took off after some kind of argument."

"That's right," Neil confirmed, assuming Hopper was actually buying into his portrayal of Max as some sort of delinquent, "she ran off right before I went into work. I told you, she sneaks out and runs off. You didn't happen to bring her back, did you?"

"No, no I didn't. Because you know what I just can't explain? She ran off from your house and shows up at the library about a half hour later, which is about how long that would take to walk, with a bit of a mark," It was more than a bit, but he figured Neil wouldn't own up to anything more serious.

"So what, it's illegal discipline a kid now?" Neil retorted, not realizing the hole he was quickly digging for himself. "People wonder what

why everything's going to hell and then a cop shows up at your door for popping a kid on the mouth for back talking."

"I'm going to have to ask you to step outside and place your hands behind your back," Hopper dropped the pretense of empathy now that he had what he needed.

"Excuse me?" A red headed woman Hopper assumed to be Max's mother walked up behind Neil but remained silent. Her eyes were slightly bloodshot and he was willing to bet that something was up, but he lacked grounds for any sort of warrant to force his way in. Another problem for another day.

"The girl shows up with a black eye a half-hour after you just admitted to hitting her," Hopper explained. "Is there really any part of this you need me to explain to you? Step outside, place your hands behind your back."

"She's a liar, you know."

"Yeah, I kind of figured that out when she tried to convince me that nothing happened. Fortunately, I didn't believe her and you conveniently cleared the whole thing up for me. This is the last time I'm going to ask nicely. Step outside, place your hands behind your back."

The Blazer was not, strictly speaking, designed for transporting suspects as there was no barrier between the front and back seats, but Hopper wanted the privacy of the vehicle to accomplish his second objective of the evening which was ensuring Neil Hargrove knew retaliating against Max would be a bad idea. Had he called for one of his officers to pick Neil up in a patrol car, he would have lost his opportunity.

Hopper attempted to make eye contact through the rear view mirror but Neil stubbornly stared out the window. "Nice to see you exercising that right to remain silent," Hopper's voice was congenial, but his intention was clearly antagonistic. "That's alright," he continued, "this is better as a one sided conversation anyway. Those boys you're worried about Max hanging around? I know them. Very well, in fact. It's a small town, I'm not above playing favorites and

they're definitely some of my favorites. If she so much as stubs a toe, I'm going to know. I'm going to assume you catch my meaning."

The glare staring back at him in the rear view mirror confirmed that Neil did indeed understand he was being watched.

## 14. Chapter 14

**A/N Apologies for the slow update. Holidays and whatnot. I've been thinking about the variety of parent/child relationships portrayed on the show and decided the Joyce/Jonathan combo needs attention.**

It was late when Hopper finally left the station. Stranded motorists were accounted for, closed roads were appropriately marked, Neil was properly booked, and the report Hopper would have ordinarily put off until Flo threatened him with serious bodily harm was promptly (and almost gleefully, inasmuch as that word could ever be used to describe Hopper) completed, signed and filed. He bid goodnight to the officers on the overnight shift and braced himself for what promised to be an ugly drive out to Joyce's to tie off the final loose ends of the day.

Hopper arrived to find the herd of kids to whom he was begrudgingly becoming more and more attached gathered around the dining room table, completely absorbed in a board game he didn't recognize. None of them, to include Eleven, so much as looked up when he walked in the door. He made a mental note that she was completely oblivious to his entering the Byers' home for the second time that day and he needed to remind her to be more aware of her surroundings. It was a conversation familiar to both of them by now.

"Took you long enough," Joyce chided in lieu of an actual greeting.

Hopper removed his hat and coat at the door, laying them over the back of a nearby chair. "I do actually have other things I need to get done, you know," he told her with mock gruffness.

"So," she asked expectantly, "what happened?" Joyce's raised pitch finally managed to catch the attention of the kids and they not so subtly hushed their own conversation to hear the adults'.

"Well, if you're all going to listen anyway, you may as well get in here," the words were barely out of Hopper's mouth before they kids came piling into the living room. He focused his attention on Max even though he knew he was really addressing the whole group. "I

want you to know that I tried to set this up to leave you out of it as much as possible. I made sure Neil knows that you insisted nothing had happened and that I'm the one who forced the issue. He was stupid enough to admit to hitting you, so your cooperation should be unnecessary from this point on."

"So there's nothing I actually have to do to get Neil in trouble?" she clarified

"That's right," he answered nodding.

"And there's nothing I can do to stop it either?"

"Nope, not a damn thing," he hoped that she understood how much of a favor this was to her. If she had the power to get his charges dismissed, then Neil would do nothing but try to coerce her into dismissing them. "Now I need you to really hear me on this part because this is very important: Neil's got to believe that I'm watching him in order for this to work. I know his type; he wants an easy target. That means you need to tell me if *anything* happens at home, no matter how small it seems to you. In fact, it's better if it's something small because if he thinks I'm paying attention to petty bullshit, he's less likely to try his luck with anything bigger. I'm going to stop by to talk to you kids after school from time to time, just to make sure your stepbrother sees me. If you see my car, don't come to me, just don't take off and I'll come to you. We'll make it look like you can't avoid me and I can be the asshole who's hell bent on making a big deal out of nothing, got it?"

"I still think this is going to blow up," Max as stubbornly pessimistic.

"And if it does, then you let me know. You can call the station or the boys can all get me by radio. Now you need to call your mom and give her the option of coming to get you."

"I don't see why, she won't be able to make it out here."

"I know which is why she'll have to agree to you staying here, but you have to give her the option so she doesn't assume Joyce is part of the problem. You'll get one night here for things to cool down and then tomorrow night at home. Neil should be home day after

tomorrow. Now, go call your mother. She knows you're here anyway."

Max slumped off in the direction of the phone, knowing there was no good argument left but still not really wanting to talk to her mother.

"I already fed the kids," Joyce turned to Hopper, redirecting the conversation, "but there's food left over."

"I'd really just rather get home," he responded thinking wistfully of the quiet cabin.

"You're not actually planning on heading back out tonight?" Joyce asked incredulously. "Just stay over, it will be easier."

"Joyce-" He started, but she quickly interrupted.

"El's never gotten to have a sleep over," Joyce lobbied on Eleven's behalf, "and after tonight, Max's mother is never agreeing to another overnight so it's pretty much now or never."

"You have enough kids on your hands," but really what he meant was that he wanted peace and quiet, not a hoard of thirteen year olds.

"So what's one more? The boys can camp out in the living room, the girls can sleep in Will's room."

"I'll sleep on the sofa with the boys," Jonathan volunteered, "then you can have my room."

With the addition of Eleven's pleading eyes, Hopper felt that this was a damned conspiracy and gave in with a groan.

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Joyce found herself inexplicably awake around 2am. She wasn't hot, cold, or hungry. She wasn't roused by a nightmare or a noise. She was just awake for no apparent reason and it irked her to no end, particularly since not being able to sleep made her anxious about not sleeping which just compounded the whole insomnia experience. It

was evidently the witching hour. She finally gave up willing herself back to sleep and decided to head to the kitchen for a cigarette and a change of scenery. She took a reflexive head count as she walked down the hall: five boys, two girls and a Hopper in a pear tree.

The snow had stopped falling allowing the skies to clear and the moon to illuminate the night. The cold bluish white reflecting off of drifts of heavy spring snow contrasted with the warm yellow light of a Bic lighter and the burning end of Joyce's cigarette. She leaned back in her chair at the kitchen table, closed her eyes and through sheer will power tried to drive the frenzied flurry of thoughts from her mind.

"What are you doing up?" she knew without opening her eyes that Jonathan had walked into the kitchen. She knew her kids by their breath, by their footsteps, by their scent, by the unique way they displaced air when they came into a room.

"Checking on you," he replied softly, not wanting to wake the pile of sleeping boys in the adjacent room. "What are you doing up?"

"It's not your job to check on me, Jonathan," she admonished. "It should be the other way around."

"I guess we can check on each other, then. So are you going to tell me?" Jonathan pressed.

"Tell you what?"

"What's keeping you up. You used to stay up all night, you know, after Will and Bob and everything, but things seemed to be getting better."

"You noticed that?" she had hoped she was more subtle.

"Like I said," he shrugged, "we check on each other. You're still dodging my question."

Joyce finally opened her eyes, took a long draw from her cigarette and considered the young man sitting across the table from her. She wondered when he'd gotten so grown up seeing as how it was only yesterday she was teaching him to tie his shoes.



"I'm feeling guilty," she finally confessed.

"For what?"

"This whole..." she gestured here towards Will's room where the girls were sleeping as she searched for the words that never came, "...*thing* today was making me second guess myself for waiting as long as I did to kick your dad out. For putting you in the middle. For making you grow up too fast." She ticked off the list of her parenting transgressions.

"You didn't-," Jonathan started to interrupt her, but she wouldn't allow it.

"-yeah I did. You don't have to spare my feelings on this one, Jonathan. I know I handled it badly."

He chose not to argue the point because he knew she would never agree to not place the blame on herself.

"I'm not agreeing you handled it badly," he carefully qualified, "but why *did* you put up with him as long as you did?"

She considered how exactly to articulate her rationale. She knew it made sense to her at the time, but putting it into words years later was another story. "I could have gotten myself out whenever. Financially, your dad was more of a burden than a help, so I wasn't worried about that. We were broke with him, we were going to be broke without him. I was more worried about what would happen between you boys and him if I wasn't there to intervene."

Jonathan nodded knowingly. "I used to pick fights with Lonnie to get him to leave you alone."

"That's kind of funny because I used to do the same thing to get him to leave you and Will alone," she paused for several moments before continuing. This conversation was a long time coming, neither of them was in much of a hurry. "I was worried he'd fight me for joint custody and you'd end up spending half your time with him, just so he could avoid paying child support. Lonnie never really wanted much to do with Will, but I think he figured you were more of a

fighter and he would have gone after you both just to get you. I thought I needed to wait for him to give up on you."

"You weren't wrong, you know?" he told her looking up through is too long bangs. "He would have tried to take us. Hell, after everything he's pulled, he still tried to convince me you were the problem parent while Will was missing."

"God, he is such an asshole," she laughed humorlessly. The gall of that man was incredible. "I'm sorry I did such a shitty job picking a father for you boys."

"Hate to break it to you Mom, but if you hadn't picked Lonnie, Will and I wouldn't exist. Genetics and all," Jonathan quirked an eyebrow at her. She appreciated his subtle and occasionally dark sense of humor.

"Smart ass," she smirked.

They returned to silence, each looking past the other, each still clearly deep in thought.

"Is that what you were doing with Bob?" Jonathan finally broke the silence.

"What do you mean?"

"Picking a better father," he clarified, "For Will, I mean. Let's be honest here, Bob wasn't exactly your type."

"That's not true," but it was. And even if she felt bad admitting it, she knew it was true.

"Yes it is."

"Bob is..." her slip in using present tense made her breath catch. "was a nice guy."

"He was a very nice guy," Jonathan agreed, "but he was more like Will than like you. If you're going to find someone, find someone who's nice *and* a good fit for you. Will and I will sort things out."

For the second time that night she wondered when he had gotten so old. He was more of an adult than she was much of the time.

"I got the impression you didn't like me dating," she was teasing, but there was a fair amount of truth in her statement.

"Yeah, well, I guess I had to get used to the idea," he knew that he had been unfair to Bob and to her last fall and he felt badly about it but there was nothing to be done about it now. "You're going to be what? Forty-seven when Will graduates high school? That's a long time to be alone."

The intractable problem with parenthood is that if you do your job well, you make yourself obsolete. She wouldn't allow Jonathan to not chase his dreams even if she secretly feared how she was going to handle life without him. She reached for his hand across the Formica table and he readily gave it to her. She remembered that hand when it was so small, it only just barely wrapped around her thumb. When it had no scars. When it had never brandished a weapon. When it held nothing but innocence and potential. She remembered staring at those impossibly small hands wondering what they would create and how they would touch the world. And here she was, quickly approaching the time when independence would take those hands from her and she would get to see what Jonathan did with them while she watched from afar.

"Yeah," she admitted, "I guess that is a long time to be alone."

## 15. Chapter 15

As time went on and Eleven worked to put the trauma of the lab behind her, there were habits she was able to break and fears she was able to overcome. She ducked her head underwater while taking a bath. She stopped hiding food. She even closed the bathroom door all the way. Slowly, Eleven adapted to her new world but the one habit that she clung to was to remain perfectly still upon waking.

For most of her life, it had been a crucial survival tactic. Papa retrieved her whenever he had use of her without regard to whether Eleven was sleeping (her needs were irrelevant and therefore invisible to him), but being discovered awake drew attention and therefore started her day earlier. When she was hiding in the woods, sleeping meant someone could find her and sneak up on her so it was necessary to surreptitiously assess what, if any danger had discovered her while she was vulnerable. After accepting Hopper's offer to take her in, it took her a while to not be constantly on high alert. First to trust that Hopper was not going to suddenly turn on her and then to be confident that he had successfully protected her through the night.

But even after it had stopped being a survival skill, Eleven retained the habit, not disabusing Hopper of his assumption that she was simply a late riser. One of the not terrible side effects of being nearly non-verbal for such an extended period of time was that Eleven was keenly observant instead. Where most people spend half of a conversation merely waiting for their turn to talk, Eleven cared little for speaking and focused her energy on listening and absorbing. She found people were less guarded if they thought she was asleep and she took the opportunity for gaining personal insights whenever she could find it.

This was how she learned that there were days when Hopper still reached for a beer before breakfast and paced for awhile before putting it back. And she learned that he looked in on her in the middle of the night. She wasn't quite sure why, but if it made him feel better to confirm she was still there, she wouldn't say anything. Hopper never said anything when jar upon jar of peanut butter went "missing" from the kitchen shelves, it seemed only fair to equally

feign ignorance in order to humor his insecurity.

The night everyone was snowed in at the Byers', she learned that Mrs. Byers slept just as poorly as Hopper, but at least she had Jonathan to keep her company. She also had the same need to make sure no one disappeared from their beds in the middle of the night and the added compulsion to replace the blankets Eleven had intentionally kicked off to begin with.

When Eleven awoke for the second time that night, she quickly realized Max was also awake and was intrigued. Eleven had made her peace with Max, and Max had forgiven Eleven her rudeness, but Max was still a difficult person to get to know, especially when they only had contact in small doses. Eleven listened to several minutes of tossing and turning before breaking her general rule of pretending to be asleep.

"Max? Are you awake?" Eleven whispered tentatively into the darkness.

"Yeah," Max whispered back. "How long have you been up?"

"Don't know. No clock, hard to tell."

Max walked over to Will's window and pulled aside the curtain. "I've never seen this much snow in my life."

Eleven thought back to their conversation after the Snow Ball and tried to remember where Max said she moved from. "There's no snow in...?"

"California," Max reminded her. "Not the part I lived in. Not like this, anyway. This is like *The Shining*."

"What's *Shining*?"

"*The Shining*," Max corrected. "It's a book. And also a movie, but the book is better. Basically this family moves into a hotel for the winter to take care of it and after they're snowed in, they find out it's haunted. I don't want to give you any spoilers, but I'll let you borrow my copy if you want to read it."

"Ok, yes," this didn't sound like any of the books Eleven had been provided so far.

"I'll get it to Mike after spring break and he can get it to you. Actually, I'll send two because, I know *exactly* which other book you should read," Max's voice was a mixture of excitement and deviousness.

"What?" Eleven's curiosity was piqued.

"It's so much like you, it's weird. I don't spoil it for you though. You'll just have to see."

"I hate waiting," Eleven grouched. She felt that telling her just the tiniest bit about something and then making her wait was as frustrating as being told to leave wrapped presents alone. More frustrating, in fact, because at least with wrapped presents, you could feel them and get a clue as to what was inside.

Eleven heard yet another person awake in the middle of the night and paused to listen. "Lay down," she whispered urgently to Max moments before the bedroom door cracked open.

"I know you're awake, I can hear you two talking. Go to sleep," Hopper told them, sounding very harassed.

"We *can't* sleep," Eleven complained.

"It's four in the morning," he countered, "figure it out." And with that, he shut the door before either girl could make further argument.

Max's attempt to suppress a laugh turned into a snort which Eleven found inexplicably hilarious and had to hide her face in her pillow until she could safely be quiet. The girls lay silent, but wide awake waiting a respectable amount of time before Eleven positioned herself closer to Max to resume the clandestine conversation. Clearly, their error had been in not placing enough distance between themselves and the shared wall between Will and Jonathan's bedrooms. The added distance between them and the wall and the closeness to one another, combined for a much lower and less detectable volume level.

"Do you think Mrs Byers is right?"

"Right about what?"

"That your mother will never allow you to sleep over again?" it was sad to Eleven that this might be her first and last girl's sleep over.

"Probably," Max shrugged and Eleven tried not to take offense at how little this appeared to bother her. "As far as she knows it's just me and a bunch of boys, so she would *definitely* not be cool with that if she had a choice."

"Why?" Eleven really did not understand the big deal. The boys were fine to hang out with, but not to sleep near?

"Seriously?" Max was incredulous. "Please tell me someone has explained the birds and the bees to you."

"I *know* what sex is," Eleven retorted, proud of herself for catching Max's meaning as those sorts of things usually went straight over her head. It was impossible to consume the amount of television Eleven did and not walk away with at least a basic understanding. Not the same sort of understanding she would have had if there was cable TV at the cabin, but between tawdry daytime television, a steady diet of teen movies courtesy of the boys and a biology textbook meant to get her ready for school, she had certainly managed to put enough of the pieces together.

"Ok, good," Max was relieved that she was not going to have to dance around that particular issue. "Well, that's why most parents don't allow co-ed sleepovers and why we're in here and the boys are out there. If we weren't snowed in, I wouldn't be here right now. Neil doesn't even like me hanging out with the boys in broad daylight."

"I'm not a boy," Eleven countered.

"Yeah, but my mom doesn't know about you yet. And then once you get to officially exist, you being Hopper's kid is going to be a problem seeing as how he's planning to terrorize Neil for me. But hey," she added, sensing Eleven's disappointment, "that doesn't mean it won't happen, we'll just need to cook up some good cover stories."

"Cover stories?"

"Otherwise known as a lie, El," Max stated bluntly. "And yeah, I know you've got this whole hang up about lying which is great with friends, but my mom and Neil aren't my friends."

"You don't like your mom?"

Max thought about how she wanted to answer that question because it wasn't something she felt completely clear about even in her own mind. "I guess," She started, faltered and then started again, "Look, I always *love* my mom, I don't always *like* her."

"Why not?" Eleven thought this might make sense, but she needed more information. Hopper was not always her favorite person and because it hadn't previously occurred to her that you could separate those two feelings, she always felt guilty about it.

"She's not always the same person," Max explained, "She changes her personality to work with whoever she's with. She used to be one person when she was with my dad and now she's a completely different person with Neil."

"What's she like when she's alone?"

"That's the thing: she's never alone. Ever. She literally told me she and my dad were getting a divorce the day she moved us into Neil's house. My aunt says she's afraid to be alone, so she's never broken up with a guy until she had someone new lined up."

"What was she like when she was with your dad?"

"Well, first you have to understand, my dad is more like a big kid than an adult. He's a lot of fun to hang out with, but he's totally irresponsible."

"You don't like him either?" Eleven was now officially confused.

"I do...usually...but that doesn't mean I can't see that he's a screw up. So when my mom was with him, she was the person who always had to be in charge and make sure everything got done. Neil doesn't do anything crazy or irresponsible, he controls everything and now my



mom just sits back and acts like she's not even capable of balancing a checkbook."

"Where is your dad?"

"In California. I'm supposed to be there now for the school break, but he said he couldn't afford a plane ticket for me so here I am. I knew this would happen when we moved. Without my mom to keep his shit together, he's not going to be able to make sure I get to see him."

The conversation ebbed into a silence that El was comfortable with but Max was not. "Sorry," Max apologized looking for a way to fill the gap in conversation and then laughed lightly at herself, "I'm not even sure why I'm telling you all of this."

"Because I listen?" Eleven suggested.

They heard heavy male footsteps again in the hallway and both ducked their heads bracing for another reprimand. The Byers' house was a very active place in the middle of the night, Eleven noted. The footsteps stopped briefly outside the door, but it remained closed. They were undetected.

"Probably better try to sleep," Eleven felt she was pressing her luck and testing Hopper's patience.

"Yeah, probably," Max agreed. "El?"

"Yeah?"

"I had fun tonight."

"Me too, Max."

Both hoped this would be the first of many sleepovers.

## 16. Chapter 16

A/N I know I said this was progressing in a plotless, yet chronological meander, but after watching ET with my kids, I couldn't help myself.

Thoughts for this chapter:

Eleven's character S1 being modeled on ET.

Eleven's meekness with Papa contrasted with her shouting at Hopper reminded me of an article I read by a person who rescues grayhounds. The author celebrated her most recent rescue's misbehavior because it was a sign that the dog finally felt comfortable enough to risk being naughty.

Late December 1983.

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Hopper had pulled rank and faked sick to avoid leaving Eleven alone at the cabin more than absolutely necessary. But the excuses wore thin after a few days and they both had to get back to their new normal.

"I need to get back to work today, so you're gonna need to stay here by yourself," he explained over breakfast, "You remember the rules, right?"

"Don't be stupid," she dutifully recited.

"Yeah," he smiled, "don't be stupid. Keep the curtains closed, stay inside and don't open the door until you hear my secret knock."

She knocked on the table twice, once, three times to prove she understood.

"That's right," he said proudly. "Now you're going to need to eat lunch in the middle of the day."

"Eggos?" she asked hopefully.

"No, kid, you need to eat something other than waffles. Remember I showed you how to make a sandwich? Make yourself a sandwich and eat an apple."

"Then Eggos?"

"Waffles are for breakfast, El. I got you some soda for a treat. You can have one with lunch, ok?"

She nodded.

"I'll be home tonight and we'll eat dinner."

"When?" Eleven had no concept of time in the lab and she learned she liked knowing when to expect things.

"When will I be home? Oh, I don't know, usually 'bout six-thirty?"

"Six three zero?"

"Yeah, six-thirty."

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After passing her morning watching television, Eleven's stomach growled and she remembered she was supposed to make herself lunch. El eyed the tempting yellow box in the freezer. Hopper had told her no, but he wasn't there. Then again, she didn't know what would happen if she defied him. She knew what happened when she defied Papa and while she was reasonably certain Hopper wouldn't lock her in the dark, she didn't know what he'd do instead and she wasn't confident enough to test those waters. Not yet.

She closed the freezer door and opened the refrigerator instead. She pulled out the round plastic container of lunch meat, a square of cheese wrapped in cellophane and a jar of mayonnaise and set to making a sandwich just like Hopper had shown her.

"Sandwich," she tested out the unfamiliar word in the silent cabin. She'd never had a sandwich before the cabin and now she'd had both kinds: peanut butter and bologna. She thought she was really getting the hang of things.

Hopper had told her to eat something else. What was it? She looked around the small kitchen hoping to jog her memory. Oh yes, an apple. The edible red and green balls were sweet, and Eleven liked things that were sweet, but they were also "real food" and Hopper liked it when Eleven ate real food. Apples were something they were in agreement on and she hoped he would be pleased she remembered.

When Eleven returned the sandwich ingredients to the refrigerator she saw a cluster of red aluminum cans and flashed back to the lab experiments. She shut the door quickly, leaned her back against the closed door, slid to the floor and waited for her heart to stop racing. When she regained control she remembered Hopper told her she could have a soda with her lunch. Or did he say "should"? She didn't want to make him unhappy on her very first day alone, so she resolved to open the refrigerator door again and this time decided that the soda in the white cans was a lot less threatening than the soda in the red cans.

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Hopper was a nervous wreck leaving Eleven alone the first time but he hid it well. He walked into the station, placed his keys into Flo's waiting hand and removed his coat while she snatched the cigarette dangling from his lip. He responded to the cheerful "Mornin', Chief" greetings from his officers with gruff nods or crude banter. He half listened to Flo as she read him phone messages that would dictate the course of his day while he poured himself a cup of coffee.

It was all just like any other day as far as anyone else was concerned. Internally it was a day like no other. Hopper kept running worst case scenarios through his mind. He left for lunch as early as he could justify it and decided to run by the cabin just to check.

Eleven was not impressed with the soda in the white cans. It was bitter rather than sweet and it made her belch. But in the few days she'd spent with him, she'd determined that Hopper wanted her to finish eating what he'd given her to eat, even the parts she didn't like. The same thing applied to the milk, juice and water he wanted her to drink and so she assumed he would feel the same way about soda. Maybe later when she knew him better, she might push the boundaries a little more, but for now, she thought it was best to avoid anything that might make Hopper unhappy.

The best way to get something unpleasant out of the way was to just do it quickly, so Eleven took a breath and drank the contents of the white can as quickly as possible. By the time she'd finished clearing her lunch dishes as she'd been shown, she was feeling a little light headed and decided to lay down on the sofa.

The longer she laid down, the worse she felt. Her fingertips were slightly numb and she felt a little sick to her stomach. She was about to fall asleep when she heard knocking twice, once, three times. Eleven was confused. There was no way it was that late already, was it? But that was the correct knock, even if it was several hours ahead of schedule. She struggled to sit up and before she could focus enough to open the locks, she heard the knock a third time accompanied by Hopper yelling "Kid? It's me, open the door!"

She didn't understand the difference between nervousness and anger (frankly, Hopper struggled with that as well and didn't have the excuse of an inhumane upbringing to pin it on), so she pushed herself to open the locks before collapsing back on the sofa.

"El?" Hopper called as soon as he crossed the threshold. "Are you ok? What took you so long to open the door?"

"Sick," came a very pitiful whimper from across the room.

Hopper crossed the cabin in three strides. He instinctively felt for a fever but found none.

"Does anything hurt?" God help them if she needed a doctor.

She shook her head no, placed a hand on her stomach and repeated, "Sick."

"Have you felt sick the whole morning?" he asked trying to narrow down the possibilities.

She shook her head.

"Did you eat lunch?"

She nodded.

Hopper went to the kitchen to see if anything was amiss. The bread was fresh, the lunchmeat and cheese smelled fine and then he noticed the cans in the refrigerator.

"Hey, El?" He called to her, "Did you have a drink with lunch?"

"Yes," she replied, "soda." Just like he'd told her to.

"Mmm hmm," he nodded, "in the red can?"

"White," she said, confirming his suspicions.

Eleven was small to begin with because of the conditions of the lab, but after spending a month foraging for food in the woods, she couldn't have been 60 pounds soaking wet. She wasn't sick, she was drunk off of one can of Schlitz.

He tried to suppress a laugh out of empathy, but it took standing with his back to her for a few minutes biting his lip in order for him to regain his composure.

"Ok, El," Hopper announced, "I know why you feel sick. The white cans are fine for me because I'm fat and old. They make you sick because you're thin and young. You can have the red cans."

She shook her head and said simply, "Bad."

"Why are they bad, El?"

"Papa," she whispered as though saying his name too loudly might conjure him out of thin air.

Hopper resigned himself to the fact that Eleven wasn't going to be able to explain why certain things frightened her and, frankly, it didn't really matter why. He got her an aspirin and drink of water and put her to bed to sleep off her buzz. When he left the cabin to return to work, he took the Coke with him and left it at the station for the other officers.

At dinner that evening, he grabbed a beer and sat down at the table. Eleven was feeling much better after she'd sobered up, but she looked at the white can and wrinkled her nose. Hopper chuckled and hoped that after she was eventually able to live a normal teenage life, she'd hold on to at least that one aversion.

## 17. Chapter 17

Mr. Clarke was the sort of teacher he himself desperately needed as a kid and never had. He understood that the AV Club was as much about providing respite for kids who didn't fit in anywhere else as it was about the science. So when Max Mayfield asked if he would assist her in convincing her mother of the academic benefits of the club she had previously shown zero interest in, he assumed her motivation was not based on an interest in audio-visual equipment but on the need for a Monday afternoon escape. He happily called Mrs. Hargrove to oversell her on the academic benefits of AV Club and the value of extracurricular activities on college applications. From that point on, at least one afternoon each week, Max had a built in alibi.

The following Monday afternoon, the entire club was in the AV room doing nothing AV related with the exception of Lucas who was conveniently out sick.

"What the hell is that?" Max asked when a plastic head fell out of Dustin's backpack as he fished for whatever junk food had accumulated at the bottom of his bag.

"Revenge," Dustin answered simply.

"Looks like a mannequin head to me," Mike deadpanned.

"It's not a mannequin head, it's a wig form, but you're not seeing the bigger picture."

"Which is?" Max asked.

"Lucas is scared shitless of clowns," Dustin explained "He screwed with me last year for April Fools and now it's payback time. All I need is someone who can make it look good." Dustin looked expectantly at Will.

"I don't paint, I draw," Will shrugged.

"Seriously? What's the difference?"



"Hey, do you think we could hide this in his locker?" whatever loyalty Max might have to Lucas was clearly trumped by her commitment to a solid prank.

"It's not going to fit in his locker," Dustin said, "I already checked."

"Just how much payback are we talking about here?" Max asked, considering the potentially endless possibilities.

"He hid pictures of those creepy ass twins all over my room and wrote 'red rum' on the back of my bathroom door so I'd see it in the mirror. And he talked my mom into letting him do it. Who turns your own mother against you?"

"He taught Holly to say 'they're heeere' every time the TV went to a static channel," Mike shuddered. "She wouldn't stop doing it for months."

"What are you planning on doing with this clown head once you have it?" Will asked.

"I don't know," Dustin said absently, "I'll hide it in his bed."

"Lucas' parents won't play along," Will warned.

"Then I'll give it to Erica and let her torture him with it."

"Now you might be crossing the line into cruelty," Mike was wavering. Holly could certainly be a pain in the butt as far as little sisters went, but Erica was a walking nightmare.

"Two words for you, Mike: they're heeeere," Dustin reminded him.

"You're right. Give it to Erica."

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On his next Saturday visit, Mike was supposed to be showing Eleven how to properly graph algebraic equations, as that was something that was too difficult to explain on an audio tape, but conversation

wandered to other more interesting topics to include Dustin's pending revenge plot.

"What's April Fools?" Eleven interrupted Mike's retelling of the story.

"It's a day where you play pranks on people," she looked dubious so he assured her, "It's for fun."

"But Dustin wants to scare Lucas," Eleven was not clear how intentionally subjecting someone to their fears counted as fun. Mike wasn't catching on to the fact that her personal experience with such things significantly skewed her perception. In the early days of her training, Papa would intentionally frighten her to get the necessary emotional response needed to trigger her powers. These were things Eleven still had not revealed to anyone, so of course Mike would have no way of knowing.

"It's not something that would *really* scare him," Mike tried to explain. "It's more like being startled. Like just being a little bit scared."

She nodded because she trusted Mike enough to accept what he was saying at face value, but she really did not actually understand the difference.

Later when Hopper returned from dropping off Mike, he found Eleven curled up on the sofa quietly pouring over her dictionary with a furrowed brow.

*Prank: a trick of an amusing, playful or sometimes malicious nature.*

*Malicious: Intentionally harmful or spiteful.*

*Spiteful: A petty desire to harm, annoy, frustrate or humiliate another person.*

Each successive definition was worse than the last and none of them were good things. What it all boiled down to was that the rest of the group was teaming up against Lucas and this did not seem right to her.

"What's the matter, kid?" Hopper asked absently as he scanned the kitchen for dinner options.

"Confused," she replied and continued flipping back and forth through her dictionary. He waited a moment to see if she was going to expand on that answer, but evidently, she considered "confused" to be a complete response.

"About?" he prompted.

"Sometimes friends are . . .," she paused, looking for the word she wanted to sum up everything she'd been reading, "mean to each other?"

That got Hopper's complete attention very quickly. "Someone being mean to you?"

"No," she said quickly, hearing the dangerous tone in his voice, "Not me. Lucas played tricks on Dustin and on Mike to scare them. Now Dustin is going to scare Lucas. For April?"

"Ah," Hopper relaxed realizing immediately what was going on, "they told you about April Fools Day, did they?"

"Yes, but I don't understand. A prank is..." she flipped to a page she'd marked with her finger, "...malicious which means..." she flipped to another page marked with a different finger, "...spiteful which means..." flipping again, "...wanting to harm which means..."

"I got it, I got it. Stop," he cut her off before she spun herself in circles of definitions. "Look, kid, sometimes, among friends, a certain amount of teasing or playing tricks isn't really unkind. Especially if it's something mutual."

"Mutual?" Her head was already swimming with new words.

"It means something that goes both ways. It applies to both people."

"Is scaring someone unkind?" she decided to just get right to the point.

"Well, I suppose it depends," Eleven frowned at this answer. She tended to think in very black and white terms and she'd thought she'd asked a very plain question that ought to have a very plain answer.

Hopper tried to think of a concrete example that would help him explain it better. "Watching a scary movie is a fun way to scare yourself, yeah? But it's all fake and you know it's fake so it's a different kind of scary than something that's real, right?"

"Yes," she said slowly, not really understanding where he was going with this.

"Because there are different kinds of scary. Some are fun, like scary movies, some would just be cruel because it's too real. So it would definitely *not* be funny to make you think the Bad Men were coming, but something that's more like what a person does to scare themselves would be different. Does that make sense?" He asked and she nodded, still rolling the idea around in her head.

Eleven continued to think about the whole prank business after she went to bed that night. No matter how they explained it to her, it still seemed mean. But both Mike and Hopper, the two people she trusted most in the world, had said that it wasn't mean, it was fun. Eleven decided that if this is how they defined fun and she knew that fun was a good thing, then she wanted to do something fun for them as well. She fell asleep that night brainstorming ideas.

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The following night as they were finishing dinner, Eleven asked if Hopper would take her to visit Mrs. Byers by herself. Eleven had never before asked to see Joyce alone and when he questioned why, she very cryptically replied with a shrug, "Just want to talk."

Hopper didn't know why she was suddenly asking for one on one time with Joyce, but he could guess. As is often the case with guesses, Hopper guessed wrong, but at least he didn't ask any follow up questions which suited Eleven's purposes just fine. Joyce had made the exact same wrong guess as to why Eleven wanted to talk to her, but this was the girl who held a very special place in Joyce's heart (and only partly because Eleven had saved Joyce's family on more than one occasion) so she would have happily accommodated the visit for whatever reason. Joyce warned Will to stay away until

he was given the all clear, sat El down at the kitchen table with two steaming mugs of hot chocolate and got straight to the point. "So. Hop told me you wanted to talk to me. Is everything ok, sweetheart?"

Joyce's eyebrows were knitted together with concern, but Eleven's eyes were lit up with mischief. "Yes," she said resolutely, "I just need a plan." Eleven proceeded to explain what she had learned about pranks and how she wanted to do something fun for Mike and Hopper, but she was going to need some help. Joyce listened quietly all the while thinking that Hopper was either an idiot or a lunatic for encouraging this sort of sophomoric behavior in light of El's ability to wreak havoc and propensity to completely misjudge social situations.

"Hey, Will?" Joyce called Will out of hiding now that she knew this was not a sensitive subject matter.

"Yeah, Mom?" he called back cautiously, not quite ready to abandon the relative safety of his room for whatever field of landmines had been laid in the kitchen.

"Just come here, I don't want to shout across the house." When he poked his head in the doorway, Joyce explained, "Apparently, Mike and Hopper thought it was a good idea to introduce El to the concept of practical jokes."

"Spiders," Will replied.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Spiders," Will repeated. "If you want to get Mike, go with spiders. Trust me."

"I didn't bring you into this to make it worse," Joyce admonished.

"Not worse," Eleven corrected, "*Better*."

"Come with me," Will grabbed El by the wrist and pulled her towards his room, "I have exactly what you need."

Joyce watched them disappear down the hallway and briefly considered stopping them before deciding that Hopper deserved whatever he got for having such poor judgment to start with. "Serves

him right," she muttered to the empty kitchen before lighting a cigarette.

Hopper never asked what was in the bag Eleven brought home from Joyce's that night because he assumed he knew and didn't really care to broach the subject to obtain confirmation. Eleven was glad he didn't ask because she had no legitimate explanation for the large rubber tarantula Will had snagged from the Byers' Halloween decorations or the VHS copy of a campy 1950's era horror movie featuring a giant radioactive spider so she could learn to copy the movements realistically.

Where Papa had used fear to teach Eleven to use her powers and Kali had taught her to increase those powers through anger, the small, controlled movements Eleven was teaching herself required her to set aside all emotion and just concentrate. When she had perfected the precise movements she wanted, she waited for the next visit at the Byers' house when all the kids would be there.

It started with the rubber creature scurrying along the baseboards, almost invisible in the shadows. The sort of thing that, when seen out of the corner of your eye, is easily dismissed. And when Eleven didn't get the reaction she wanted, she made it cross the living room floor. But the dark floor provided too much camouflage and no one noticed. Eleven made eye contact with Will who nodded almost imperceptibly to let her know she was not yet over playing her hand and the realistic-enough-from-a-distance beast began climbing the wall, barely noticeable against the wood paneling wainscoting but more clearly visible once it reached the tan paint and even then, it took a while for anyone to notice.

"Son of a bitch!" Dustin yelled and tripped over Lucas in his haste to put as much distance between himself and the threat as possible.

"What the hell, Dustin?" Lucas was irritated until he saw what scared Dustin to begin with and joined him in flying to the opposite side of the room. "Holy shit!"

The commotion caught Hopper's attention and he came running in from the kitchen where he had been talking to Joyce armed with the closest weapon he could get his hands on, in this case a poker from

the unused kitchen fireplace. "Where is it?" he demanded, scanning the Byers' living room for whatever fresh hell had descended upon them now. He saw the fake arachnid, raised the metal poker and took aim.

"Could we please make demolishing my house only an annual event and not a monthly thing?" Joyce grabbed Hopper's arm to prevent him from swinging the poker.

*Hopper and Mike were totally right, Eleven through to herself, This is definitely fun.* In her amusement, she broke her concentration and accidentally flung the spider towards the middle of them room causing everyone to jump back.

"Wait a minute," once Mike saw the nightmare up close, he could see that it wasn't real. And then he noticed the small trickle of blood coming from Eleven's nose. "It was you!"

"You said pranks were fun," Eleven defended herself while trying to keep a straight face.

"Jesus, kid, don't ever do that to me again," Hopper leaned against the back of a chair, giving his heart rate a chance to slow to a normal pace.

"You also said pranks were fun," Eleven reminded Hopper who grunted back at her in response.

"I thought it was hysterical, personally," Max chimed in earning disdainful glares from Lucas and Dustin who were still keeping their distance. "You big babies, even if it was real, it's not like tarantulas are poisonous."

"Venomous," Dustin corrected.

"What?"

"Poisonous is when something is deadly if you eat it. Venomous is when is..." Dustin trailed off as he realized he was doing it again, "You know what? Never mind."

"Ok, fine," Max conceded, "it's not like tarantulas are *venomous*."

"I can't believe it took you guys that long to actually see it," Will was shaking his head. "She ran it across the floor twice and none of you noticed."

"Wait, you were in on it?" Mike realized that the friendship Eleven and Will had developed might not bode well for him if they were going to take the opportunity to conspire against him.

"That's what you two get for telling El all about how much fun practical jokes are," Joyce pointed to Hopper and Mike here.

"Did *you* know she was planning this?" Hopper asked Joyce, similarly realizing the unintended dangers of encouraging Eleven to bond with the Byers' family.

Joyce didn't answer, she just snatched her fireplace poker back and walked off to return it to the kitchen.



## 18. Chapter 18

**A/N today's inspiration: David Harbour's speech at the Critic's Choice Awards.**

**Responding to My Secret Garden (who does not turn on PMs) , I think its human nature to seek out people with shared experiences with whom you can identify. To compare notes and, frankly, to feel normal. Eleven is isolated on so many levels. She was absolutely physically isolated for 13 years and then less so for another year, but still kept on the outside. She's isolated in her limited ability to communicate. She's isolated in having been cut off from her family (though she's building herself a nice set of surrogates). And she's isolated in being the only person with powers (aside from Kali who is problematic in other ways). In her position, I think the idea that there are other people out there like her would feel less isolating and it would be an idea she would latch onto.**

**I would be surprised if S3 has her discovering completely new abilities (though I would expect her current abilities to continue to grow in power), but I think she would be highly motivated at 13/14 to test her boundaries.**

**But yes, also a nod on my part to the very blatant homage on the Duffers' part.**

**Math didn't require much vocabulary or outside contextual knowledge. It was something that had it's own internal logic and Eleven only had to be able to work the problems, not explain how she worked them. She was good at math.**

**English was a struggle. Grammar was something foreign and non-intuitive that had to be learned and constantly applied. And no matter how many new words she learned, she rarely made it through an entire conversation without having to ask or guess the meaning of a word. Reading books presented an additional struggle because most stories made references to people, places or events that everyone except Eleven seemed to know about and take for granted. She pushed through books that she would be expected to have read by**

the time she started high school, but she had yet to really experience the joy of genuinely losing herself in a story.

This is why it was something of a surprise for Hopper to come home to find Eleven glued to a paperback novel with the TV off. She obviously knew he was there because she unlocked the door to let him in, but she didn't so much as look up to acknowledge his presence. He was so pleased to see her finally engaged in reading without the use of threats or bribes that he didn't interrupt her, but instead went about his own evening routine in silence until it was time to call her to dinner.

Hey, kid," he called to get her attention and, when she failed to look up added, "What are you reading?"

"Book," she replied and missed his rolled eyes.

"I can see that. What book?"

Instead of answering, she just angled the cover towards him so he could see for himself.

"Firestarter? Really?"

"Do you think it's real?" she asked, finally volunteering a complete sentence and taking her seat at the table.

"No, El," Hopper explained patiently, "that guy's a fiction writer. Horror stories."

"But this is so much like me," she protested, still clear enamored with the possibility that it could be a true story. "How did he know?"

"He didn't know, he imagined," Hopper replied, "Who gave you that book?" *Because I'm going to strangle them.*

"Max," Eleven said beginning to eat her dinner. During their snow storm induced sleepover, Max had told her this book was so much like her that it was weird and she was right.

"Her parents were experiments, just like Mama," Eleven continued.

"Uh huh," he responded absently.

"Except," El clarified, "her powers make fire. I wonder if I could make fire."

"Don't start fires," Hopper's tone was suddenly sharp, though Eleven was too lost in her own thoughts to really notice. "That's a new rule."

Eleven continued to stare off into space, musing to herself and ignoring Hopper.

"I'm dead serious, El," he warned and when she still didn't acknowledge him, he reached across the table and took hold of her forearm. "Hey. Look at me so I know you're listening. You could accidentally burn down the whole forest, you included."

This seemed like an over reaction to Eleven. But she knew that Hopper's mind always went immediately to worst case scenarios, it was who he was. "We make fires all winter and don't burn down the forest," she argued, more just to make the hypothetical point than anything. They were, after all, talking about a power she didn't even have.

"We make very controlled fires in a wood stove specifically designed for that purpose," he countered.

"I could test and see if I could light the stove," to Eleven this made perfect sense. If Hopper agreed that wood stoves were designed to start fires in without burning down forests, why wouldn't you use one for that purpose? Just to see what happened. She assumed that probably nothing would happen. But maybe...

"No, El," Eleven finally realized that Hopper's tone had progressed from sharp to angry, which struck her as wholly unreasonable.

"I was just wondering-" she began sullenly.

"Don't even wonder," he cut her off authoritatively. "Just no."

She stared at him, surprised and honestly a little angered by the heat of his reaction. She wasn't always able to access the Void or move objects telekenetically, she had to learn. She realized now that the

tactics Papa used to teach her were abusive, but she didn't regret having powers. Experimenting on her own to discover what else she might be able to do seemed perfectly logical.

Kali's words echoed in her mind. *Let me guess. Your policeman also stops you from using your gifts.*

"You're mad about something I haven't done yet," she snapped at him, emphasizing her point with an exaggerated eye roll.

"This is not a 'yet' kind of thing," he snapped back.

They glared at one another in stony silence until Eleven shoved her chair back from the table and stalked away.

"Come back here and eat your dinner," he shouted after her.

"Not hungry," she shouted back before slamming her door and barricading herself in her room where she would stay until after Hopper left for work the next morning.

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"You look like hell, Hop," Joyce commented as he walked into the otherwise empty store.

"El isn't speaking to me," he responded in explanation.

"Why? What did you do?"

"Why would you assume I did something?" He asked defensively.

"Because we've met. If you thought you were in the right, you wouldn't lose sleep over it. So what did you do?"

Hopper proceeded to explain the previous night's argument which, he had to admit, sounded utterly ridiculous now that he was not in the moment.

"So, in other words," Joyce summarized, "what you're saying is that

you yelled at her for thinking. Yeah, I'd give you the silent treatment too."

"That is a gross over simplification."

Joyce merely raised a dubious eyebrow in response.

"She wasn't just thinking, she was planning," he was justifying his response out of pure stubbornness now.

"Are you sure? Did you actually give her a chance to talk through it or did you flip out and shut her down?"

He replayed the argument in his mind yet again and realized Joyce was completely right. She'd made an offhand remark and he had overreacted. "Damn it."

"Think of it this way, Hop. You've got less than five years to take her from where she is to being able to be on her own without you. You can't just order her not to do things. What do you think she's going to do when you're not there to tell her what to do?"

"This may come as a surprise to you, Joyce, but that doesn't make me feel any better," he quipped.

"No?" She asked in mock surprise. "I know it's hard to trust her judgment, which is why you have to teach her to have judgment you can trust."

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As dusk set in, Eleven was deciding whether she was going to spend another evening ignoring Hopper. She thought about what Max had said about loving her mother but not always liking her. El would not be mad at Hopper forever, but she was definitely still mad at him at that moment, so spending another evening shut up in her room was an option.

She was confident that Hopper would never deny her meals. Not when he knew that Eleven had been starved into submission in the

past and had spent a month going hungry in the woods. But he also wouldn't humor her to the point of delivering food to her room if she was going to lock herself in and refuse to speak to him, so if she was going to ignore him all night, she would need to plan ahead. After briefly considering hijacking the toaster, she decided to just hide a sandwich and a large thermos of juice in her room. She was ready to win this stand off.

Hopper's knock came at 5:30pm, much earlier than he typically came home. Maybe that meant he had cooled off and realized how stupid he was being. Or maybe it meant he was still convinced that wondering was suddenly too dangerous of a hobby and he was unwilling to leave her unsupervised more than absolutely necessary. She unlocked the door from her bedroom and waited.

Hopper's footsteps walked the familiar lap around the cabin as he divested himself of his hat, his coat and his holstered gun before he stopped outside Eleven's closed door.

"El?" He called, resting his forehead against her door. "C'mon kid, you can't ignore me forever."

Not necessarily, she thought. She was perfectly comfortable not speaking. Maybe not forever, but definitely for a hell of a lot longer than he was comfortable with.

"Fine," he said after it was clear Eleven was not going to respond. "You don't have to talk to me, just come out here so I don't have to talk to you through a door. Please."

"Still mad at you," she told him as she opened the door and stood, arms crossed in the doorway. She didn't want him getting the wrong idea, but she would at least hear him out. He did say please, afterall.

She raised her eyebrows in silent question.

"Don't look at me like that, ok? I'm sorry, I shouldn't have yelled at you."

"Scared?" She decided to throw him a bone.

"Terrified," he admitted.

They stared at one another, however, unlike the previous night, this time they were each somewhat sympathetic to the other.

"It's not fair to tell me I can't practice. Or learn new things," she could be calm, but she wasn't backing down.

"I know," he conceded. "If you'd listened to me, you wouldn't have gotten strong enough to close the gate. But you have to take reasonable precautions."

She nodded.

"Which, at the very least, would include me being right there. With a fire extinguisher. Possibly in the middle of a lake."

"A lake?" She raised her eyebrows at him, realizing he might be kidding her at least a little.

"And I had better never catch you trying to make fire on your own, are we clear?"

"Yes, clear," she answered and when he continued to look expectantly at her, she added, "What?"

"Promise me," he insisted.

"I Promise."

"Because I really mean it."

"You won't take yes for an answer, have you noticed?" There was a hint of a smile on her face. They both knew she was poking fun.

"Don't give me a hard time," he cautioned her. "This whole giving up control isn't my thing."

"It's ok," she hugged him completely with a patronizing pat on the back, "You'll get used to it."

## 19. Chapter 19

"...and a process server brought these," Hopper had managed to completely ignore every word Flo had said up until that point when she smacked him in the chest with a thick manila envelope.

"Since when does the DA send actual process servers?" He asked assuming the envelope contained the usual array of traffic stop summonses.

"It's not from the DA's office," she told him with a single knowing and disapproving raised eyebrow.

Hopper noticed the address label: Curley County Superior Courts.  
"The hell?"

"Everything ok, Chief?" Callahan asked.

"Yeah, yeah," Hopper replies distracted, "Everything is just fine. I'll be in my office."

Hopper sat down at his desk and pulled out a thick packet of papers. A god damned child protection lawsuit captioned In re the Interests of J.H. Who the hell would send this to him? The list of people who knew about Eleven was short and the list of people who knew about Jane Hopper was even shorter.

He sifted through the official looking documents considering his next move. He ultimately decided to light a cigarette and pulled a battered business card from his top desk drawer.

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Doctor Sam Owens' phone line would never not be monitored. The Department of Energy shut down operations at the Hawkins National Lab, leaving Owens' behind to ostensibly live out his "retirement." In reality, the DOE and the alphabet soup of agencies covertly hiding behind that acronym could never afford for Dr. Owens to not be on their payroll. He was sent in to clean up the mess Brenner had made



and he was left in place to make sure it stayed clean.

Officially, Hopper was part of the cover up, so periodic check ins with Dr. Owens were expected. DOE thought of Hopper as their man on the inside who would prevent anyone from digging too deeply in the wrong places and misdirect investigations that might reveal things DOE didn't want discovered. Hopper knew Owens to be his man on the inside who himself looked the other way and let him know whenever Big Brother was watching.

Provided they discussed the subjects they would be expected to discuss, it all worked out very neatly.

"Hello?"

"Hey Doc, it's Jim Hopper."

"Chief! How are things?"

"Not bad. Quiet."

"Ah, well, quiet is good. Quiet is what we want, right? How's Will doing?"

"Well, he has nightmares here and there, but he says they're actual dreams and not the 'now memories' or episodes like he was having before."

"I'd like to get an MRI on him just in case. Make sure we're seeing normal brain activity."

"Yeah, I'll have to talk to his mother about that. Any activity at the lab?"

"Not a thing. In fact, I just downgraded the in person monitoring from weekly sweeps to monthly. Still remote monitoring around the clock of course."

"Of course. No issues with trespassing?"

"Not unless you count raccoons."

"Good. So. How's the leg?"

Inquiring into Owens' health meant Hopper needed to have an off the record conversation about Eleven. It was a not so subtle reminder that Owens owed her his life and Hopper would continue to cash in that favor for as long as necessary.

"It's coming along."

"Good to hear. Well, unless you have anything else for me, I'm gonna head out and grab some lunch," Hopper was telling Dr Owens where he would be without actually telling him.

"No, I think that does it for me. Get back in touch with me after you talk to Mrs. Byers about that MRI."

"Will do, Doc. Talk to you then."

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Approximately an hour later, the two *just happened* to run into each other at the Hideaway and tucked themselves into a booth. The ambient noise masking their conversation.

"Where did those come from?" Owens asked examining the papers Hopper slid across the table.

"I was hoping you'd have the answer to that," he responded dryly. "Someone claiming to be a process server brought them to the station while I was out on a call. I checked in with Curley County courts. Juvenile cases are named using initials to protect kids' identities and there is a case captioned J.H. but it stands for Jennifer Hughes."

"So someone took the time to find a real case number to mock up a fake document. It's not a bad idea to start planting seeds, use the small town rumor mill in your favor. But this..."

"This is someone telling me they not only know about her, but they know about the birth certificate and they know their way around the system," Hopper finished Owens' sentence for him.

"I haven't heard anything and this sort of thing isn't our style, but if I were to hazard a guess, I'd say you might want to talk to Murray Bauman."

"Murray Bauman?" Hopper had hoped he'd heard the last of that particular man, "Is he sniffing around again?"

"Never stopped."

"Funny, you haven't mentioned that."

"It's not something I've needed your help on," Owens explained unapologetically, "He's too eager, it makes him easy to mislead. Give him something salacious enough and he buys it."

"You create conspiracy theories to feed him to make him look like a nut case?"

"Me personally? No. But if you ever want to throw the pubic off, you give a good leak to a bad source and no one will want to believe the truth."

"Until someone comes along and catches you on tape," while Hopper was willing to trust Owens, he still found him to be a pretentious ass and enjoyed reminding him how he was bested by a couple seventeen year olds.

"And even then, no one would have believed the real story," Owens shrugged it off. "Don't get me wrong, those tapes actually ended up giving us a useful out and it's not like the EPA is going to come breathing down my neck anytime soon, but I'm under the impression that Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers gave Bauman more information than was strictly necessary in order to get his help. All I'm saying is a visit to him might be wise."

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Sesser, Illinois, where Murray Bauman set up his barely on the grid industrial bunker, was a half day's drive from Hawkins. Joyce happily agreed to let Eleven spend Friday night into Saturday in order to give

Hopper as much time as he needed. Now all he needed was to make sure he knew exactly what he was walking into.

As soon as she and Hopper arrived, Eleven had pulled Mike and Will into a game of cards at the kitchen table and Hopper pulled Nancy and Jonathan aside while they waited for Joyce to get home from work.

"I need to know exactly what happened between you two and Murray Bauman last fall," he told them.

"Um, why?" Jonathan started chewing his thumbnail.

*God, that kid was an easy mark, Hopper thought. He couldn't have been more obvious if he'd had a neon sign flashing "guilty" over his head.*

"Is something wrong?" Nancy was more polished and harder to ruffle.

"Yeah, actually," Hopper cut straight to the chase. "I was fake served with fake court papers for Eleven using the name on her fake birth certificate. There are a very small number of people who know enough to pull that off and Murray is at the top of my list. So before I drive out there to talk to him, I need to know what he knows."

"Ok, well. Remember at that point, we didn't know where El was or even if she was alive," Nancy took over talking and Jonathan was more than happy to let her. The story she gave was straightforward and blunt with exactly the right amount of details, but it still seemed like she was holding something back.

"Nancy, why don't you give Jonathan and me a minute?" Hopper asked in a way that was clearly not an actual question. Nancy looked equally nervous and annoyed, but muttered something about checking in on the kids and walked away.

"Ok Jonathan," Hopper turned on him and Jonathan all but broke into a sweat, "it's about four, maybe five hours from here to Sesser. You and Nancy stayed Friday night at a hotel so you could get to Bauman's place first thing Saturday. You had a full day with Bauman, so why didn't you drive back Saturday night?"

Jonathan didn't immediately answer letting Hopper know he'd

correctly zeroed in on the hole in Nancy's story.

"Come on now, I need you to level with me. I'm trying to cause problems for you, but if I need leverage, I want to have it. I need to know for El's sake. What did Nancy leave out of the story?" Jonathan was very susceptible to guilt trips.

"Alright," Jonathan relented, "the thing about watering down the vodka?"

"Yeah?"

"So after that Murray gave Nancy and me each a drink, to celebrate, you know? And then when I said no more because I needed drive back, he talked us into staying."

"Talked you into staying how?"

"He thought we were...together, you know? And we weren't. Not then anyway. But he just, it's like he reads people, and he...I don't know, it's like he sort of goaded us into staying. I'm not blaming him, we could have left, but we didn't."

"Where'd you stay?" Hopper could guess where this story went, but he needed to be sure he was right.

"His place," Jonathan replied unhelpfully.

"Where did he offer you to sleep?" Hopper clarified. When Jonathan didn't answer, he continued, "You're not looking at me, Jonathan. Look, I'm willing to bet that I did a hell of a lot worse at your age. Just spit it out."

"He offered us the bedroom and I asked if there was also a sofa. He said there was a pull out sofa in his office, but he suggested we just share the bedroom."

"And?"

"And we did. We didn't start out that way, but then..." Jonathan trailed off.

"Ok, that's all I needed to know. As far as your mother is concerned, this conversation never happened," Hopper grabbed Jonathan's shoulder affectionately.

As if on cue, Joyce's car pulled into the driveway. Jonathan took the opportunity to escape to the kitchen.

"What are you guys playing?" Jonathan asked.

"Poker. You want in?" Will invited him

"Don't play with her, she's a shark," Nancy pointed at Eleven

"Am not. You're a sore loser." El shot back.

Hopper considered the ability to hold your own at a poker table to be a basic life skill and he'd spent a number of evenings teaching Eleven the various strategies and variations of the game. She cleaned him out more often than not and he couldn't have been prouder.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Nancy all but sing-songed.

"In or out?" Mike asked impatiently, waiting to deal.

"I'm in," Jonathan sat down at the table

"Sucker." Nancy smirked.

"Its only for peanuts," Will told her.

"Wait a minute," Nancy said accusingly to Eleven, "You played me for money."

"You agreed to play for money," Eleven shrugged, "They only agreed to play for peanuts."

"Sucker." Jonathan smirked back at Nancy.

"If we're going to play, lets play," Mike began doling out the cards.

Hopper stood next to Joyce off to the side of the room, his voice low enough to be lost to the din of the card game. "Thanks for letting her stay the night. I hate to leave her alone too long."

"Don't thank me, just get that asshole to leave her alone."

"Alright," Hopper said getting Eleven's attention, "I'll be back for you tomorrow night. Don't make a pest of yourself."

"Don't let her talk you into playing for money," Hopper warned Joyce.

"I've been warned," Joyce smiled.

"And don't play Blackjack with her. She counts cards," he called back as he made his way out the door.

"Math isn't cheating," Eleven shot back. This wasn't a new argument between them.

## 20. Chapter 20

Joyce was, at best, a passable cook in the sense that she had not yet managed to give anyone food poisoning. She would get distracted and burn things, get impatient and under cook them, and fail to plan ahead and have to make on the fly substitutions that should never have seen the light of day.

Hopper's parting instruction to Eleven had been to not make a pest of herself. What he'd actually meant by that was the litany of rules he'd run through on their way to the Byers'. Stay indoors, stay out of sight if someone comes to the door ("...which means actually being aware of your surroundings and not being too caught up in a game to pay attention like last time when you failed to notice I'd walked in the door. Twice."), doors stay open while Mike is there, mind your manners, eat what you're given, don't keep poor Joyce up half the night, "and for Christ's sake, don't back talk her like you do me."

None of this was new or unexpected in theory, but the eating what she was given was proving to be a challenge in practice. Mrs Byers had given her the kind of mac and cheese she didn't like, the chicken was dry, the canned green beans proved to be an even less appetizing texture than mushy peas which Eleven had not thought possible and Mrs Byers only had 2% milk which didn't taste right compared to the whole milk Hopper used to attempt to put a little weight on her. Eleven had learned that swallowing peas whole minimized the distasteful flavor, but applying this strategy to an entire plateful of food was less feasible and the attempt had left her somewhat nauseous.

Mike was allowed to stay late but not overnight. Apparently this was considered and end run on the general prohibition against co-ed sleep overs. Eleven bemoaned the fact that Hawkins was not more blizzard prone as that seemed to be the only exception to the rule. But it was an extra opportunity to spend time together and Mrs Byers didn't get grumpy at Mike and El for sitting too close together, so there was that.

The last thing Eleven remembered was curling up against Mike's shoulder while watching a movie. She figured she must have fallen



asleep because she woke up to find herself alone in the living room, lying on the sofa with pillow and blanket, with a taste in her mouth from having not brushed her teeth before going to bed. The sofa wasn't uncomfortable and Eleven assumed that Mrs. Byers thought she was doing El a favor by not waking her up, but after finding herself unexpectedly alone, Eleven couldn't get re-settled and back to sleep.

The noises at the Byers' house were different than at the cabin and every time she heard something unfamiliar, she had to identify it to make sure it wasn't a threat. After she'd figured out the sound of the furnace, the refrigerator motor, and the mantle clock, Eleven began to fixate on the front door. It only had two locks. And because there was no trip wire to warn her, if someone came to the house while she was sleeping, she might not wake up in time to defend herself or her friends.

Once she allowed that thought to enter her mind, the "what if" floodgate opened. What if Kali was right? What if Papa really was out there? What if he was in Hawkins, waiting for them to give themselves away? What if Hopper was wrong to trust Dr Owens? What if Dr Owens had sent Hopper on a wild goose chase as a way to get him out of town so Dr. Owens could send the Bad Men after her?

Eleven realized for the first time that the only other exit was through the kitchen which would have required anyone who wanted to escape to run straight past the front door. It was as if whoever designed this house put no thought whatsoever into the need for escape routes. Clearly, the only logical solution under the circumstances was to stay awake and aware of her surroundings all night.

Based on her experiences the night of the snow storm, Eleven was expecting Mrs. Byers to wake up at least once in the middle of the night to ensure that everyone was still in bed. When she heard a door open and footsteps progress towards her down the hallway, El meant to stay quiet, to feign sleep, but it so happened that the wind kicked up and something knocked against the house startling her and giving her away.

"Can't sleep, huh?"

"Sorry." Mrs Byers didn't seem annoyed to find Eleven awake in the middle of the night, but all the same, El didn't want to put her out.

"Why are you sorry?"

"Not supposed to keep you awake."

"Don't worry, sweetie, you're not keeping me awake. I keep me awake." Mrs Byers motioned for Eleven to make room on the sofa and settled in next to her. "Now. Do you want to tell me what's keeping you up?"

Though she didn't respond, Eleven's eyes darted unconsciously towards the door.

"Can I guess?" She asked when Eleven didn't answer. "No one from that lab knows about your cabin, do they?"

Eleven shook her head no.

"And if someone ever found it, they'd have to get through Hop first who, knowing him, probably sleeps with a gun within arm's reach?"

"Two."

"And here I went and left you on this sofa all by yourself right in front of a door and a big window in a house that everyone knows about. I'm sorry, sweetie, I wasn't thinking. Would you like to sleep in my room?"

"Yes," Eleven would never has asked, but she was relieved by the offer. "Mrs. Byers?" She asked tentatively.

"Yeah?"

"I'm hungry."

"I have just the thing. Don't tell the boys though."

Mrs. Byers walked into the kitchen without needing to turn on any lights and returned with a container of Oreo cookies that she'd stashed somewhere.

"Here," she offered Eleven the plastic tray of cookies after grabbing some for herself. "I always thought junk food tasted better in the middle of the night."

Eleven had to agree that there was something about eating cookies in the dark while everyone else was sleeping that was particularly satisfying.

"Will has a terrible sweet tooth," she continued in a very one sided conversation, "If he knew I had these, they'd be gone in a day."

"Sweet tooth?"

"That means someone who really likes things that are sweet, its not an actual tooth."

"I have a sweet tooth too, then," Eleven determined before scraping a layer of sugary white filling against her teeth.

"I can tell."

"Wasn't allowed before," she explained.

Eleven noticed that Mrs. Byers make the same sound Hopper made when she said something about the lab. A quick little breath, almost like a hiccup. She hoped she wasn't upsetting them. Maybe she should stop saying things.

"Well, you're allowed now," she said resolutely. "Especially at my house."

They finished their midnight snack and Eleven brushed her teeth now that she was awake enough to do so before making her way to Mrs Byers' room.

"Are you comfy?" She asked tucking El into the big bed.

"Yes."

"Warm enough?" Eleven wondered what was with Mrs Byers' obsessive need for everyone to be warm.

"Yes."

"You let me know if you need anything, ok?"

"Stay?" The request left Eleven's mouth before she'd even thought it through.

"Sure, sweetie, I'll stay with you."

"Will I keep you awake?" Eleven asked.

"You don't need to worry about that, I'm plenty old enough to worry about myself," Mrs Byers told her before settling back into her own bed.

No one had ever pulled Eleven into a hug for sleeping like Mrs. Byers. It reminded her of the night she'd gone into the Void to find Will. Up to that point, the only adult who had held her (at least as far as she was aware) had been Papa and she remembered being struck by how very different it felt.

Sleepiness set in quickly and as she was drifting off, Eleven thought to herself how lovely it would be if Mrs Byers were her mother. And then immediately the guilt jarred her back awake.

"You ok, sweetie?" Mrs Byers must have picked up on her sudden mood change.

"I have a mama," El told her.

Without missing a beat, Mrs Byers replied. "Yes, you do. And she is very brave. She never gave up on you."

Though this was not new information to Eleven, having someone else acknowledge it made her feel very proud.

"I just...", she couldn't find the words to finish her sentence. Mrs Byers waited patiently and Eleven settled on, "She can't be here."

"No, she can't."

"Because of me."

"Oh, no," Mrs Byers kindly corrected. "Not because of you. For you. And that is very different."

Mrs Byers was thoughtful for several moments. "When someone we love can't be there, it can be hard to let someone else into our lives," she finally said. "Sometimes we might worry we're replacing that person and it feels unfair."

"Yes," Eleven agreed.

"No one will ever replace your Mama," She assured El, "but you shouldn't feel bad about adding other people. You have room in your life for all the people who care about you. People who love us want us to be happy even when they can't be there too."

With that comforting thought, Eleven finally fell into a peaceful sleep never realizing that Mrs Byers remained awake for a long while considering the implications of her own words.

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Hopper pulled up to 3833 Walker Drive noting that he had never before seen a person's home reflect their personality more accurately. He felt his blood pressure rise just looking at it, the grating sound of Murray Bauman's smug voice over the intercom only irritated him further.

"Hello, Jim. What brings you to my door?"

"You know goddamned well what brings me to your door, now get your ass out here and talk to me."

"You're awfully hostile, I don't see how that's to my benefit at all."

"Oh yeah?" Hopper sniped at the security camera, "Seems a lot better for you than me showing up here with a warrant."

"Excuse me?"

"I understand you provided alcohol to Jonathan Byers and Nancy

Wheeler in November. Vodka, was it? They were only seventeen, Murray. That's contributing to the delinquency of a minor at the very least."

"I'm outside of your jurisdiction, Jim," Murray reminded him.

"So I'll pass it off to the local PD," Hopper shrugged off the technicality. "Handing out alcohol to runaways and encouraging them to stay the night after you know they've crossed state lines? Sounds kind of perverted, doesn't it?"

"This is extortion," Murray said angrily.

"This is an opportunity to clear up any misconceptions I might have before I take them any further," Hopper corrected him. "I'm not having this discussion with a damned camera. If you're not inclined to talk to me then I guess I have my answer."

There was a moment of silence before the door opened and a disheveled Murray Bauman stood in the open doorway.

"Well come on," Murray gestured impatiently for Hopper to come inside.

Hopper followed Murray through conspiracy theory central becomingly increasingly claustrophobic the deeper they went into the building until they arrived in what must have been a living room.

"You wanted to talk," Murray said sitting down in a beaten up arm chair, "so talk."

"I got your little package," Hopper said sitting down on the sofa opposite Murray. "Seems like you're the one who wanted to get my attention. You have it."

"You've obviously talked to Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers. You know what I know," Murray probably meant that to be threatening, but Hopper had played this game of chicken with much more experienced opponents and was unimpressed.

"I have talked to them and you know what I know. So since we could each royally screw each other over, why don't you just stay out of

this and we can forget we've ever met."

"Jim," he reasoned, "you need a convincing cover story."

"Stay out of this," Hopper growled the warning a second time.

"Jim, hear me out, you can't just show up with a teenage kid and expect people to not question it."

"I appreciate your concern," Hopper ground out in a tone that made it clear he appreciated absolutely nothing, "but it's under control."

"Is it, really?" Murray's ego got the better of him with that remark. "You know, for someone who made his career in military intelligence, your buddy Owens didn't really think this through. Once I found out the psionic child I was looking for was connected to the lab, it took all of one afternoon searching newspaper archives to find out about Terry Ives and her lawsuit against Brenner and Hawkins National Lab. You're familiar with this, I assume?"

Hopper said nothing, but merely glared in response.

"Thirteen years ago, there was no record of live birth for a baby girl Jane born to Terry Ives. She was painted as a grieving would-be mother driven crazy by her loss and her lawsuit fell apart. I followed up with Roanoke County and, imagine my surprise, I find that there's suddenly a paper trail for this baby who's no longer still born and you're on the birth certificate. I mean really, it's almost insulting.

"He could have at least changed the kid's first name, the mother, the date of birth, had her born in a different state, hell even a different town. Something. If you're going to make something up out of whole cloth, you should at least take a little creative license."

"Why are you getting involved in this?" Hopper cut off the monologue.

"Why do I do anything?"

"I don't know, Murray, to be a pain in the ass? Personal gain?"

"Because I want to know, Jim."

"I could hook you up with a different hobby, you know. One that's less likely to result in your body ending up where no one will ever find it."

Murray scoffed. "Don't insult me with empty threats."

"You do anything to jeopardize that little girl and you'll find out that threat isn't empty."

"This sort of thing takes time to set up," Murray explained as though Hopper gave a rat's ass. "If this were real, there would have to be family court involvement. No one just calls you out of the blue to say: hey, come pick up your teenage kid who's a complete stranger to you. You want to talk about raising suspicion? Nothing's more suspicious than that."

"No one asked you to set up anything! Drop it and walk away," Hopper warned.

"Bullshit, you made me chase you for months and you knew the whole damned time. I got that lab out of your town as you narcissistically like to think of it, you owe me."

"Now we're getting down to it," Hopper leaned back. "I don't owe you jack shit, but obviously this is about more than your obsessive need to know the truth. What's in it for you?"

The two men stared each other down for several minutes before Murray Bauman finally answered.

"I took on another missing person case," Murray gestured to a bulletin board laying out the fruits of his investigation. "It's stalled out but I know this child of yours can find people telepathically."

"So you want her help? And why would I trust you?" The mere idea was almost laughable.

"Like you already said," Murray smiled, "Mutually Assured Destruction."



## 21. Chapter 21

A/N First of all, thanks to everyone who is reading and giving feedback. It's affirming to hear from people who enjoy the things bouncing around in my head. There are a little over 200 people who seem to be reading this consistently, so hello to you all and thanks for humoring me.

We're in early/mid May 1985, picking things up Saturday morning while Hopper is at Murray Bauman's. Meanwhile, back at the ranch...

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May in Hawkins was the peak of rainy season. Dreary and damp mornings gave way to humid afternoons before storm clouds rolled in and started the cycle all over again. Within a month, it would be summer, but for now it was just wet. Most days. But not that Saturday.

That Saturday it was blue skies and sunshine and the sort of day that made following the rules so hard. Mike had shown up on the Byers' porch as soon as he could justify being there, keen to take advantage of a time with Eleven that was not supervised by Hopper. The other members of the party would eventually trickle in, but only Mike was there bright and early.

Will answered the front door, stepped aside and called back into the house, "Its ok, it's just Mike!"

"Gee, thanks," Mike quipped with mock offense.

"You can't have Rice Crispy treats for breakfast," Mrs Byers' voice came from the kitchen, "those are a dessert."

"Could we have Rice Crispies?" Eleven asked.

"Yes."

"Then what's the difference?" she argued even though this was most likely crossing the line into the back talking Hopper had told her not to do.

"The marshmallows," Mrs Byers answered.

"Sorry, El," Will said walking into the kitchen with Mike, "I'm going to have to give that point to Mom."

"If you had Eggos," Eleven was not finished making her case, "we would have put syrup on them."

Mike understood the problem now. Eleven did not take kindly to missing out on her favorite breakfast food.

"Probably," Mrs Byers allowed.

"Syrup is sugar just like marshmallows," El waited a beat before following with, "So. What's the difference?"

"She's got you there, Mom," Will decreed tipping the scale on the breakfast vs dessert debate back in Eleven's favor.

"Ok, fine," Mrs Byers gave in, "just have a glass of milk with it because if it was cereal, you'd have it with milk. And if Hop asks, you had cereal." Because like hell she was going to eat her words after giving Hopper crap for not feeding the child a proper diet. He was right, she was impossible.

Will, Eleven and Mike helped themselves to what had been newly classified as a breakfast food and settled in at the kitchen table. Mike and Will started discussing the finalization of a school project and Eleven was distracted by the bright blue sky visible through the kitchen window.

"El?" Mike called to her after awhile.

"Hmm?"

"You were about a million miles away," Mike joked.

"Sorry, just thinking."

"You'd rather be outside, wouldn't you?" There were times when Mike and Eleven thought they could almost read each other's mind.

"It's not safe to be outside here yet," she deflected.

"What if we went somewhere else?" Mike offered, thinking aloud.

The real answer was that Hopper would lose his shit if she went somewhere else, but she didn't want to acknowledge that. Not yet. She wanted to entertain the thought for at least a little while even if it was a doomed idea. Instead, she just asked, "Where?"

"Well...", Mike realized quickly that he hadn't thought that far ahead. His familiarity with areas surrounding Hawkins was defined by what could be reached by bicycle. The quarry, the lab, Hopper's cabin and the Byers residence itself were the most remote locations he knew and they were all flawed choices for various reasons. "I guess I don't really know," he finally admitted hating to disappoint her.

"It's ok," she told him, intent on remaining positive. "Next spring we won't have to worry."

Eleven's resignation to the absolute unfairness of her situation made Mike even more angry about the whole thing. Holding her captive for twelve years was bad enough, but then forcing her to spend another two years after that hiding was just adding insult to injury. She shouldn't have to wait another year to just be able to walk outside and enjoy a sunny day.

"I know what we can do today," Will broke in. "Jonathan was showing me how to use the stop action button on the video camera that Bob left us and I have a blank tape."

Eleven didn't immediately catch on to why this bit of information made Mike's eyes light up, but she couldn't wait to find out. She quickly drank the last of the not quite right milk that turned a dessert into a breakfast, snagged one more sticky treat and headed into Will's room with the boys.

Eleven had never given any thought to how cartoons were made or how creatures like the ones in Clash of the Titans worked. She

watched fascinated as Will showed her the tiny illustrations he'd drawn on the bottom corner of each page of his school notebook that, when the pages were thumbed very quickly, gave the appearance of a tiny stick figure waving. Mike called this a "flip book" and Eleven made a mental note to attempt some on the corners of her own notebooks when she got home.

The stop action button on the camera took just a second of video and then the drawing could be changed or the toy could be moved before another second of video was taken. "It works just like the flip book," Mike explained. "But instead of a bunch of drawings that blur together because they go so fast, you have a bunch of little video shots that blur together."

An hour later, they had successfully made a small car drive independently across Will's bed before an impossible number of LEGO figures climbed out. For a person with an over abundance of time on her hands, spending an hour to produce 30 seconds of video was a marvelous new hobby.

By late morning when the other kids had arrived, the time killing ideas were free flowing and the tape was filling up. Eleven sat back to enjoy Dustin and Lucas argue over the best way to make a peanut butter sandwich eat itself while Max egged them on. Mike joined her on the sidelines and they sat side by side, knee to knee, shoulder to shoulder on the floor leaning their backs against the wall.

"There's only about a month of school left," Mike told her with a mix of excitement and trepidation. Middle school certainly had its problems, but it was at least he Devil he knew.

"Summer vacation?" She asked brightly. Eleven remembered Mike's narrative from the previous year. Day 181: last day of school. Day 182: first day of summer vacation.

"Yeah," Mike said nodding and then added, "Sorry we couldn't think of a way for you to go outside today."

"It's ok, Mike. Really. Even staying inside this year is much better than last year." And she meant it sincerely. Last spring she would have happily given up any chance of the outdoors to be sitting with

him. As long as she could have Mike, she could wait for everything else.

"Still, we should figure something out for the summer." Eleven may not have been so bothered by what she was missing, but Mike was. It wasn't right.

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Hopper wasn't gone nearly as late as he thought he might be. The late afternoon shadows were just about to fade into dusk when he signaled that he was about an hour away. Eleven signaled back "bring dinner" having had enough of the unfamiliar cooking. She was rewarded for her troubles with containers of shredded barbecued pork that tasted good but burned her lips. She knew from experience that the creamy sauce that went with the shredded lettuce (she found "slaw" to be an inherently unappealing word for food) would ease the burn, but she held out as long as she could on principle because she felt the whole thing was a cheap trick to coerce her into eating vegetables.

Eleven looked around the kitchen table and thought that she could get used to this, burning lips and slaw notwithstanding. She and Will were neither blind nor stupid and had been quietly speculating as to the nature of their parents' friendship for months now. Eleven wondered if Hopper realized how comfortable this gathering felt, he was a bit dense when it came to this particular subject. She and Will shared a knowing glance and she knew he was thinking the same thing.

Eventually, it was time to leave and after giving Mrs Byers an extra tight hug, she climbed into Hopper's car. He wasn't very talkative on the drive home. He asked if she'd had fun and if she'd behaved herself, but the questions felt perfunctory and he was barely listening to the answers, his mind clearly elsewhere. He was quiet after that and thankful that Eleven did not mind silences that other people would find awkward. It gave him space to think around her.

"Sit down, kid, we need to talk," he said indicating the sofa when

they finally reached the cabin.

"Something bad?" she asked, worried by his heavy tone.

"No, nothing bad," he quickly reassured her, "just stuff we gotta think about."

They sat, her on the sofa, he in the adjacent arm chair. He gathered his thoughts a moment more before beginning. "The guy I left to talk to is Murray Bauman. Short version of the story, people hire him to investigate things for them. He's the one who helped Nancy and Jonathan get out the tape they made of Dr Owens." Eleven nodded, she was familiar with the events leading up to the DOE leaving Hawkins. "Apparently," Hopper continued, "he knows all about you. About how you were in the lab, your abilities, your mom and your birth certificate. So he knows about us."

Eleven panicked that everything was going to unravel when the end was so, so near. The lights flickered and Hopper reached for her hand and spoke softly, "Hey, it's ok. He's a nuisance but he's not out to cause problems for you. In fact, he thinks he's helping, but I'll get to that in a minute, ok? Just don't worry, I have it all under control. Trust me?"

She nodded slowly, but her chest was still tight. It was easier to think of Hopper as being over protective and paranoid, that he could be right and someone outside of their trusted circle of friends knew about her was unexpectedly frightening.

"So like I said, people hire him to investigate things for them. In this case to find someone."

"Like you?" El asked.

"No," he said disdainfully, "not like me. No one has to pay the police money to help them. That's just what we do."

"So someone paid him money to find someone," Eleven pieced together.

"Yes."

"And he can't find the person."

"No."

"So he wants me to help?"

"That's the gist of things."

"You don't like him," Eleven observed.

"No, I don't," Hopper stated plainly.

"Why not?" This was someone who helped get the lab shut down and someone who knew all about her including her brand new birth certificate. Hopper wasn't worried that he knew and yet he didn't like him. This seemed contradictory to Eleven.

"He takes advantage of desperate people by feeding them a bunch of cock and bull false hope," Hopper explained. "The Holland's were in the process of selling their house to pay him to chase conspiracy theories."

"If I find the person, will he hurt them?" Eleven was still trying to get a handle on what sort of person this Murray Bauman was.

"No, kid, I'm not worried about that."

"Then why are you worried?"

"Well, for starters, I'm worried it won't stop. He successfully finds this person and then he uses that to get someone else to hire him and next thing we know, he's making a career for himself using you."

"Who is the person?"

Hopper took a deep breath and rubbed the back of his neck. "That's the part that makes this hard to say no to. It's a missing kid. A boy about a year older than you. So as much as I really don't want to help Murray Bauman on principle, I can't not think about the kid in the middle of this whole thing."

They sat in silence for several minutes while Eleven processed all the

information Hopper had just given her. Just as he appreciated her comfort with silences that allowed him time to think, he forced himself to give her that same courtesy.

"We could call the milk number," she said finally.

"The what?"

Eleven went into the kitchen and returned with a carton of milk. "This number," she pointed to the back of the carton where a grainy picture of a missing child was printed. "If I can find him, you can call and say where he is."

"And Murray doesn't get credit," Hopper filled in. "You're a smart kid, you know that?"

He smiled at her and she beamed. But then his face darkened once again, "I have one other worry about this"

"What?"

"Crime scenes can be pretty gruesome."

She gave him the look that said: really? After all the shit she's seen?

He correctly interpreted her look and quickly qualified, "I'm not going to try to say you haven't seen more than your fair share of bad people, kid, but you haven't seen the limits of human depravity. Trust me."

"Depravity?"

"Another word for evil. Unfortunately, there's a lot of it in the world. You go looking, I don't know what you'll find so I have no way to prepare you. And I'm gonna be honest, once a kid's been missing this long, the chance of them being alive is...well, it's not good. You're probably going looking for a body, kid."

"I want to do it," she said too quickly and he questioned whether she'd really thought this through.

"Are you sure?"



"I'm sure."

She left to fetch her blindfold and Hopper pulled the photograph from his pocket, still having very mixed feelings about the whole thing.

Most of Eleven's forays into the Void happened while Hopper was at work so it had been awhile since he'd watched her do it. He noted how much easier it seemed for her, a vivid reminder of how her powers were clearly growing as she came of age. She was a force to be reckoned with at thirteen years old, he wondered anxiously about the powerhouse she would likely become in adulthood and hoped she would be able to control herself.

Eleven found herself in the familiar blackness, picking her way through the illusion of water searching for any sign of light.

She found him. Alive but looking so ill, her first reaction was to wonder if he were somehow in the Upside Down. He was gaunt, his lips were dry and cracked and the dark circles under his eyes were so pronounced that he looked almost like he had two black eyes. Another figure materialized out of the darkness: a slightly older teen who looked almost as bad as the boy. He passed the boy a funny sort of cigarette. Instead of being made from white paper, it was a clear tube. The figures disappeared in a puff of smoke and the Void was empty again.

Eleven pulled off the blindfold looking somewhat distressed but also hopeful.

"He's not dead," she told Hopper, "but he's not doing well."

"How so?"

She described the scene to Hopper including the very strange cigarette. Eleven thought he would be more happy that the boy was alive, but Hopper closed his eyes, exhaled slowly through his nose, and seemed tired and little sad. "Ok, kid," he said finally, "I don't really know how this works but can you tell me where he is?"

Eleven couldn't explain how she could zero in on a person's physical

location when she couldn't see their surroundings and wouldn't recognize them if she did. It was just something she knew after making contact.

She retrieved the driving atlas from the bookshelf and paged through until she found the map she wanted.

"There," she pointed to an industrial area of Indianapolis. "In a warehouse."

"Ok, I'll drive to a pay phone and call it in."

The cabin was particularly quiet after Hopper left, particularly when compared to the twenty-four hours she'd spent with the Byers. She signaled Mike (Marco), he signaled back (Polo) and she felt less alone. She'd come to hate the word soon for its vagueness, but she really was starting to feel like her days in hiding were numbered. It was only a few days into December when Dr Owens told Hopper to give things a year to settle down. It was already the middle of May, that was almost half way. Half way to seeing Mike every day, half way to getting to do regular things, half way to not having to constantly worry about who might be looking for her. Maybe soon was finally the right word after all.

**A/N So...some things. For anyone who wasn't a child in the 80's (or wasn't a child of the 80's in the US), a little context. All of a sudden, thanks in large part to John Walsh (the America's Most Wanted guy) and what he did following the kidnapping and murder of his son Adam, kidnapping was an incredibly high profile issue in the early/mid 80's. The thing about it was that most of the awareness campaigns hit children more than adults and a lot of it was pretty poorly executed. I suspect your average Gen X'er has a very clear mental image of what a "kidnapper van" looks like (despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of kidnappings have always been by the non-custodial parent). Pictures of missing children printed on milk cartons were the Amber alerts of their day, but adults weren't the primary audience because kids were more likely to be sitting at the breakfast table staring at a carton of milk. It was one of those things that was part of your daily consciousness that's no longer out there.**

**Also, crack was the meth of it's day. Cocaine was too expensive for most users, but crack was cheap and readily available.**

## 22. Chapter 22

**A/N Mid to late-ish May and an exploration of another mothering relationship.**

Florence had been with the Hawkins Police Department for longer than anyone cared to remember or dared to ask. She not only knew Hawkins inside and out, she knew people inside and out. It was as though she had the ability to look past all the bullshit and see straight into a person's soul. When Jim Hopper returned to Hawkins in 1979, he was a what could only be described as a mess. He hid it well enough under layers of humor and charm and, when those failed him, foul temper, but she knew. She (mostly) kept it to herself, but she knew.

Hopper returned to work after his unexpected delivery from Murray Bauman assuming he was still flying under the radar with time on his hands to decide how best to create a believable paper trail for Eleven. That was until he came face to face with Flo and was met with *the eyebrow*. The eyebrow that knew whatever papers from the Curley County Superior Court Hopper had been served had to be old business. Before he'd cleaned up his act after the Will Byers case old business. Spent his twenties sowing wild oats without thinking about the consequences old business. The eyebrow that knew there was no reason for Hopper to be involved in a criminal case out of their jurisdiction and that his pockets weren't deep enough to make him a person worth suing which left only one other possibility. The eyebrow that knew a certain Chief of Police was going to get hauled into a doctor's office for a blood test. The eyebrow that saw his comeuppance coming, God help him. That eyebrow. The knowing and disapproving one. The eyebrow said it all with a single look, the secretary attached to the eyebrow merely said "You just let me know when I need to schedule you out for any court dates" and walked away.

The shit he puts up with.

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"I'm going to murder him," he told Joyce later that day as they sat at her kitchen table. Her boys were still in school, she wasn't scheduled to work and he was avoiding the station.

"Yeah, well that's what 42 years of bad behavior gets you," Joyce taunted him with a glint in her eye.

"First of all, I was good for the first fifteen years," Joyce gave him an incredulous look and he immediately amended, "The first ten. And the last two." Her eyes rolled involuntarily because surely he did not classify picking up a woman at her missing son's search party less than two years ago as good behavior, "Ok, one and a half. And about seven in the middle and don't *even* give me shit on that one, you weren't there to know any different. And second, this is all bullshit made up by Murray Bauman anyway."

"But it's believable because there's just enough of the truth in it," she enjoyed needling him about this because Hopper had been much more promiscuous than she ever was in their respective youths and yet she was the one who had to put up with small town judgment when Jonathan was born a mere eight months after she'd married Lonnie at the local courthouse. "Seriously though, Hop, what kind of story did you think you were going to sell?"

"I was planning on telling anyone who asked to mind their own damned business."

Joyce snorted. "You're a public figure in a small town. Good luck with that."

He glared at her for pointing out the obvious and she just shrugged.

"You can't say you have any long lost relatives, your parents and grandparents all lived in Hawkins so people know. You can't say this is an adoption, it would have to have gone through Social Services."

"So?" He challenged bordering on petulance.

"So the fact no caseworker will ever visit the school or do any sorts of background checks on you is a dead giveaway that you did not actually get El out of a foster home somewhere. Public figure. Small

town. People will notice. Just consider yourself lucky that you weren't choir boy material and your past catching up to you is a believable story."

The timing was both perfect and terrible for anyone who bothered to do the math. (Which would be everyone.) Nine months before Eleven was born, Hopper was living in New York City but he had conveniently spent a few weeks in Hawkins. Unfortunately, the reason he came back to Hawkins was to help his father deal with his mother's death and to make it even worse, he was dating Diane who was waiting for him back in New York. Joyce was right in that he was definitely not choir boy material, but he was absolutely not cheating on his then girlfriend soon to be fiancée while he was supposed to be making funeral arrangements for his mother. He was admittedly an ass, he was not that big of an ass.

Again, the shit he puts up with.

"Piss and moan all you want, Hop, it's the only thing that makes sense."

He hates that she's right. "So, I guess this is happening," he grumbles in resignation and lights a cigarette. *Damn Murray Bauman*, he thinks for the millionth time that day.

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"So, hey kid," he confessed to her over dinner that night, "I owe you a visit to your mom's.". This was true, but it wasn't the whole story. He had promised both Eleven and Becky that there would be visits every few months and their last visit had been three months ago. But also, he needed to give Becky a heads up just in case the rumor they were about to start led anyone to her door.

"You owe me?" she asked, confused.

"Yeah, I should have taken you for Mother's Day and I wasn't paying any attention. It's been awhile, you know?"

He was met with a blank stare.

"You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

"No," she told him brightly, "but I want to see Mama."

He tried to explain what Mother's day was without calling it a made up holiday or a conspiracy between the greeting card and flower industries. He probably did a poor job of it, but it didn't seem to matter to El one way or the other, she was just happy to go for visit.

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They set out the following Friday much like the last visit except this time Hopper told El there would be "no detours." She assumes he meant it when he said it, but after a couple hours, he was desperate for a cup of coffee and she was desperate for a bathroom and the little roadside diner they stopped at had a very tempting selection of pies. "No more detours," he admonished as they climbed back in the Blazer. She just smirked at him..

When they pulled into the Ives' driveway that evening, Becky met them at the door. "Hello, Jane," she greeted Eleven with a hug before acknowledging Hopper, "Thanks for bringing her, Jim."

"Yeah, sure," he replied somewhat absently while he scanned the tree line looking for anything unexpected.

Becky turned to Eleven, "Do you want to see your mama?"

Eleven nodded eagerly and followed Becky into the side room where Terry always sat in her rocking chair, mumbling the same words, staring blankly in front of her. The yes/no lamps were still set up from Eleven's last visit.

"Does she still talk with the lights?"

"Yes and I picked up one of these," Becky said pulling out what looked like a board from a tabletop game. It had the alphabet written on it arranged in a semicircle with numbers written across the bottom.

"What is it?" Eleven asked.

"It's called a ouija board. Some people think you can use them to contact ghosts, but I just use it to contact your mama."

"How?"

"She can't move big things like you can, but she can move little things like the TV dial and she can move this little plastic pointer to spell out words."

"Can we try?"

Becky smiled and set up the game board on a small side table close to Terry's rocking chair. "Hey Terry, look who's here."

The mumbling continued uninterrupted, but the lights began to flicker. The white plastic planchette started to shake and then slowly moved to J-A-N-E.

Eleven smiled and held Terry's hand. "Hi, Mama. I missed you."

"That's about all she can manage right now in one sitting," Becky told her as she got a tissue to dab the blood from Terry's nose, "but at least it's something."

"I was going to start getting her ready for bed, do you want to help me?"

Eleven nodded and Becky handed her a hair brush before releasing Terry's hair from its elastic band. While El gently brushed her mother's hair, Terry went through the nightly ritual of brushing her teeth and washing her face and hands with a washcloth. Becky showed Eleven how to lift Terry from the rocking chair and take her to the adjacent room that was set up as a bedroom. "There's no way I could get her up the stairs," Becky explained. Together they changed her into a fresh nightgown and tucked her into bed, all the while, Terry continued her never ending litany "Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the right, four to the left. Rainbow. Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the right, four to the left. Sunflower."

Eleven smoothed back Terry's hair and kissed her softly on the



forehead. *Because of me*, she thought.

"I made you something," Becky told her as they walked back into the living room where Hopper had quietly installed himself in a chair, clipboard resting on his knee, on hand in case something went wrong but otherwise trying to be as unobtrusive as possible.

"What is it?" El asked excitedly.

"Well, I didn't so much make it as put it together. It's a photo album of your mom starting when she was a baby."

Eleven turned the pages of the photo album looking closely at her mother's face aging from infancy through high school, stopping periodically for Becky to tell her stories.

"Your mama is my little sister," Becky pointed out a picture of herself as a young girl holding a baby Terry.

She pointed to a picture of a beaming little girl in front of a Christmas tree, hugging a doll. "When your mama was three or four she got this doll for Christmas and it went absolutely everywhere with her. Before long, the doll was filthy and the hair was matted but she still loved that thing. When it's head fell off, she got rid of the body and started carrying the head around." Becky smiled at the memory.

She stopped at a series of picture of two girls dressed in swimsuits. Terry looked about as old as Holly in this picture. El focused on the one of young Terry and Becky standing arm and arm in knee deep water. "We used to spend a month every summer with our grandparents at a lake house in Michigan," she explained. "I loved those summers. We spent every possible minute outside. Your mama loved swimming."

"This was her first grade class picture. Can you pick her out?"

Eleven looked through each of the faces and settled on the light haired girl sitting on the ground in the front row with a dog in her lap. "Why did she have a dog?"

"She found him walking to school and got him to follow her by

feeding him her lunch. She must have talked her teacher into letting him be in the picture. She was always very persistent. We had that dog for the next ten years, see? There's another picture of him."

They looked at the album until Eleven started having problems keeping her eyes open.

"Hey, kid," Hopper called to her gently, "Why don't you head on up to bed now." He'd been sitting so quietly catching up on the paperwork he'd brought to occupy himself that El had almost forgotten he was there.

She closed the album and hugged it to her chest. "Thank you, Aunt Becky. I love it."

"You're welcome, Jane. Goodnight."

Eleven shuffled off towards the stairs, continuing to clutch the photo album to her chest, half asleep and completely lost in thought.

Hopper and Becky watched her round the doorway and listened to her sleep heavy feet climb the stairs.

"It was really nice of you to put that album together for her," Hopper told Becky.

She shrugged in response and said only, "she's my niece."

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At some point during the night, Eleven woke up to a dark and quiet house. There was no clock in her room but it was still pitch dark outside so it was clearly nowhere near morning. Eleven opened her bedroom door quietly to check the hall and could hear no signs of anyone else being awake. She proceeded down the hall to the stairs and finally to the makeshift downstairs bedroom.

There wasn't much room left in the twin size bed, but there wasn't much to Eleven either. She curled herself against her mother hugging Terry's arm like a security blanket. Terry did not, could not, hug her

back, but Eleven would take what she could get. Terry's slow even breathing continued signaling that her sleep was undisturbed.

"I'm sorry, Mama," she whispered into the darkness before falling asleep pressed against her side.

## 23. Chapter 23

A/N So apparently I wasn't the only person who face palmed when the birth certificate was revealed. This is my attempt to fill in the holes. Thanks to JustSomeOtherGuy for period accurate periodical searching information.

And also a little closure for Terry because she deserves it.

"El?" Hopper tapped lightly on the bedroom designated as Eleven's at the Ives' residence. "Hey kid, you awake? El?" When he got no response, he opened the door slowly, allowing time for any privacy related protests, but found the room empty. His immediate and involuntary response was mild panic, but he swallowed that and headed downstairs finding Becky nursing a cup of coffee at the kitchen table.

"Becky, have you seen—"

"Jane's fine," she cut him off anticipating the question, "I found her in bed with Terry and didn't have the heart to wake either of them. Sweetest damn thing. I don't know how aware Terry is all the time, but I'd like to think she gets to wake up to her little girl snuggled up to her at least once."

Hopper remembered mornings in their apartment waking up to find a pointy little heel or elbow digging into his rib cage or wisps of fine hair tickling his nose. He didn't appreciate it enough at the time, but looking back he knew he would give anything to wake up to that again, even just once.

"Since she's still sleeping, there are some things I wanted to talk to you about." He poured a cup of coffee and joined her at the table.

"Sounds serious."

"There's this guy," Hopper began, the irritation evident in his voice as he tried to put as positive a spin on the situation as possible, "retired reporter turned private investigator, he helped shut down the lab and now he wants to help us set things up before we go public with Jane."

"What happened to a year? It's been what?"

"Six months, yeah I know. This PI went a little rogue and got the ball rolling."

"And you trust this guy?" Becky asked doubtfully.

"No, but I can't lose his body in a mine shaft so, you know," Hopper paused to light a cigarette and indulge in the mental image. "The idea is that we start using the rumor mill to our advantage now and then we let things develop at a natural pace so that by the time Jane does come out of hiding, it's more realistic."

"I guess we have to work with what we have," Becky allowed, "What rumors?"

"They have to match the birth certificate because it's already been filed with the county and I'm going to have to show it to the school to get her registered. We can't have any discrepancies or her cover story will unravel."

"So since you and Terry are on the birth certificate the story is what? She hooked up with you and never told you about Jane?"

"In a nutshell, yeah."

"Ok, I'll accept that. Purdue was a long way from Haight-Ashbury, but, you know, all that crap was a great excuse for a good time even in Indiana. How do you come back into the picture?"

"Terry goes catatonic, juvenile courts get involved, next thing you know..." Hopper trailed off.

"Where am I in all this?"

"So caught up in caring for Terry that you're not able to care for Jane."

"You're gonna throw me under the bus as an excuse why she's never been to school before, aren't you?" Becky deadpanned.

"It's actually better if it's a combination of you and Terry. Terry's

mental health was declining more than anyone realized and by the time she was far gone enough to come into your care, the damage was done."

"Considering Terry is the way she is because she tried to rescue Jane, that's all kinds of fucked up." Becky lit her own cigarette. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

"Unless you can think of something else, I don't know how else to explain the fact that she still struggles to string sentences together. Well, other than the truth, which is out of the question. If it makes you feel any better, I come out of this story looking like an even bigger asshole than either of you."

"It might make me feel better, how big of an asshole are we talking?"

"Cheating on my almost fiancé while visiting my hometown to help plan my mother's funeral."

"This probably makes me a petty person, but that does actually make me feel better. You couldn't come up with something else?"

"The timing is what it is," he shrugged. "I can't go back in time and change what I was doing fourteen years ago, I just have to fit Jane in."

"Well, just so long as Terry isn't the biggest asshole, I guess you can make me the negligent aunt."

"Thanks," he replied, dripping with sarcasm.

"Ok, well that takes care of the story, but like you pointed out last time you were here, the Hawkins lab people know all about Terry. How is her being on Jane's birth certificate not going to be a dead give away?"

"It's only a dead give away if someone goes looking which is why we're doing this in such a way that makes people not want to go looking."

"That's not remotely comforting."

"When you tell people what they expect to hear, they take it at face value and move on," Hopper reasoned. "The story we've got is not only believable, it's the kind of thing people want to believe so it's unlikely anyone in Hawkins is going to go digging looking to disprove it.

"And if they do?" Becky asked, "You found newspaper articles about Terry's lawsuit saying there was no proof her baby was ever born, what would stop anyone else from finding the same thing?"

"I only found out about Terry looking for newspaper articles involving the lab. It's a needle in a haystack going the other direction."

"All right, so that takes care of the people in Hawkins, what about The Man?" Becky had long scoffed at government conspiracy theories and still couldn't quite take herself seriously on that point.

"That's where my guy on the inside comes in."

"The one who got you this birth certificate that leads straight to Terry?"

"Not his smartest move," Hopper admitted, "but he's the person in charge of monitoring Hawkins to make sure everything they buried stays buried including the entire existence of Brenner's program. He'll ignore as much as he can, which is why we leak the story in waves so that the initial shock of me having a surprise kid out there wears off months before Jane starts showing up in public. As long as the gossip never gets noisy enough to travel far outside of Hawkins, she should be able to hide in plain sight."

"You have a timeline for this?"

"That PI I told you about mocked up some fake court papers to have me served with. The only person who put two and two together the way he hoped is the secretary down at the station. I'm not worried about her, she'll keep it to herself. The way these cases seem to go, it's not unrealistic that we could stretch it out for at least close to six months. So we may not get the full year we wanted, but we'll at least be close. Like I said, I don't think anyone will question it enough to

try to look into it, but if someone tracks you down, I wanted you to know the plan."

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Eleven woke up to find herself teetering on the edge of her mother's narrow twin bed, still hugging Terry's unmoving arm to her chest.

"Good morning, Mama," she whispered, forehead pressed into Terry's temple.

"Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the right, four to the left. Rainbow. 450. Breathe. Sunflower."

She wanted to tell Terry everything. How she'd gotten away from Papa, made friends, fought monsters and found a family in the process. But the thought of putting that much information into words was so overwhelming, tears of frustration welled in her eyes and she settled for, "You don't have to worry. I'm safe now. It's good."

"Three to the right, four to the left. Rainbow. 450. Breathe."

Surely there was some way to make her mother understand that she didn't need to endlessly relive her sad history. To let her know that her sacrifice hasn't been for nothing. Eleven thought for a moment before retrieving the ouija board from the neighboring room.

"Talk to me?"

She set the board on Terry's lap and sat next to her on the bed. The planchette shook briefly before moving S-H-O-W-M-E.

Eleven had never tried to show someone memories the way Mama had, but she was willing to try. She quietly went up to her room to get her blindfold and radio noticing that Hopper and Aunt Becky were deep in conversation in the kitchen. She was tempted to listen in, but her desire to try to communicate with Mama moreso than Hopper's repeated admonishments against eavesdropping kept her on task.



El settled herself back onto Terry's bed, tuned the radio into static and tied the blindfold around her head. A moment later, she was sitting on Terry's bed surrounded by the inky blackness of the Void.

"Sunflower. Three to the right, four to the left. Rainbow. 450. Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the right, four to the left."

Eleven tried to concentrate on a memory of Mike to show him to Terry, but instead of sending an image to Terry, she only managed to find him in the Void. She took a moment to watch Mike at the breakfast table, rolling his eyes at someone before she let the memory go and returned to her mother.

Concentrating wasn't the way to send memories, maybe it was the opposite. Eleven relaxed and let her mind clear. Without bidding them, a succession of memories flooded Eleven's mind.

*Papa! Papa!*

*It's calling you, so don't turn away from it this time.*

*My name's Mike, short for Michael. How about we call you 'El,' short for Eleven?*

*A friend is someone you'd do anything for.*

*Goodbye, Mike.*

*This is your new home.*

*I don't lie! I protect and I feed and I teach!*

*We'll always be monsters to them. Do you understand?*

*I called you every night for...*

*...353 days.*

*You did good, kid. You did so good.*

And then just as abruptly as she'd slipped into the memories, she was back on Terry's bed holding the radio in her lap.

"Breathe. Sunflower. Three to the right, four to the left. Rainbow.  
450. Safe."

## 24. Chapter 24

A/N Hopefully the quick update makes up for the shorter than normal length of the previous chapter.

A couple points of inspiration for this one. First, Millie Bobby Brown on Beyond Stranger Things talking about the connection between Eleven and Brenner in a not really negative way and even the Duffers being incredulous and bothered by it.

The second being the Joseph Campbell Hero's Journey and its prominence particularly in 80's era films. I know I said there was no plot here, but as it turns out, the process of going from being in hiding to being out of hiding actually follows the Hero's Journey reasonably well. Consider this the Revelation and Transformation piece of the arc. Or at least the tip of that iceberg. She has a lot of transforming to do.

And because I can't say it enough, I am sincerely thankful for the feedback and for the people who have indulged me in (some times very lengthy) conversation.

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It was the first week of summer vacation. Middle school was behind them and even though Mike doubted high school was going to be any better, there were two silver linings: El was going to be there and he only had to put up with four more years of school before college. But for moment, three months of freedom stretched out ahead of him and the only thing on his to do list was to get Eleven as big a share in that freedom as possible.

"I need to talk to you about El," he told Hopper as he climbed into the Blazer.

"Of course you do."

Mike continued, undeterred by the Chief's sarcasm. "There's no reason

for her to be alone so much now that it's summer and we're not in school. And before you say it, I know, she also needs to be safe, but I've been thinking."

"Go on, let's hear it."

"You said no one was specifically looking for her, they were just sort of monitoring in general to make sure things stay quiet."

"Yeah. And?"

"What's more likely to draw attention: you picking me up and driving me to the middle of nowhere all the time or me and the guys hanging out, riding bikes and stuff even if we head off into the woods like we've done forever?"

"Cut to the chase, Mike."

"We should be able to go to the cabin by ourselves. If anything, as soon as the rumors start flying, people are going to be looking at you, not us, so it's less obvious."

Hopper was quiet for several minutes before he took a deep breath. "I'm not saying no, just let me think about it."

Considering that was a much more positive response than he expected when he decided to ask Hopper to loosen the rules, Mike figured he ought to just go for broke so he tacked on, "And she should get to go outside."

Hopper just grunted in response.

"No, I'm serious. Whenever there's a group of kids, does anyone actually look to see who's individually there? They just see the group. If anyone just happened to be trespassing around your cabin that no one from the lab knows exists, El in a group of kids isn't going to be very memorable. Not like she would be on her own."

"Taking more risks right when we're about to start raising our profile is a bad idea. But. Maybe before we have to say anything, you two could hang out outside a little. Let her get some sun."

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Mike and Eleven were given permission to venture outside without Hopper so long as they stayed close enough that they could still see the cabin.

"Hopper said this was your idea," Eleven remarked as she led him to a small rock formation that was perfect for sunning.

"You looked so sad that day at Will's, I had to think of something. It's not fair for you to keep missing out."

"First time I ever went outside was that night before I met you. Did you know?"

Mike did not make the sound Hopper and Mrs Byers made when she said things about the lab, so Eleven told Mike the most things. It was nice to tell someone who she wouldn't upset.

"Then we're going to have to make up for lost time, right?" Mike forced himself to give a positive or neutral response when Eleven talked about the lab because he'd noticed how she shut down otherwise.

"Right," she confirmed.

"Just think, in a few months, you're not going to be a secret anymore. I was afraid to get my hopes up that this would ever happen."

"Hopper wasn't going to hide me forever."

"Well, maybe not *forever*," Mike begrudgingly allowed. "Eventually you'd be an adult."

"Be nice," she admonished him with mock sternness. They reached the small pile of boulders and quickly Eleven climbed to the top. She sat with her legs stretched out in front of her, leaning back on two hands with her face turned towards the sun.

"You excited?" Mike asked, climbing next to her.

"Yes," Eleven responded quickly and then more slowly added, "Also nervous."

"You should be ready for school."

"Because of you."

"Give yourself credit, El. You've done a lot of work."

"Still have more," she sighed. After a pause, she turned towards Mike and confided, "Hopper wants me to go take tests."

"What kinds of tests?" Mike asked.

"Not sure exactly. School tests? But not at the school."

"Ok, I think I know what he's talking about. It guess it makes sense as part of the story," Eleven looked at him quizzically so Mike clarified. "If the state really found out that a fourteen year old kid had never been to school, you'd have to go through some kind of testing. If you just showed up to school in Hawkins without it, it would look weird."

"Maybe," she conceded. Sort of.

"What are you worried is going to happen?" Mike got straight to the point.

"What if I get the answers wrong?" She sucked her lips in a bit, chewing them nervously.

"El," Mike grabbed her hand and squeezed it to reassure her. "It's not like the lab. Look, you know I don't like how he did it, but do you honestly think Hopper would go through all of this to keep you safe and then just hand you over to someone who would hurt you?"

"I guess not," she said quietly.

"They're just trying to figure out how much help you need to make sure you do well in school. If you do bad on the tests, you get more help, that's all." When he saw she was still not completely convinced, he added, "Would you feel better if I went with you?"

"Yes," she jumped on the offer, eager for his company.

"Then that's what we'll do. Is that the only thing bothering you?"

"Still just nervous."

"You're probably going to be nervous until it's all over because there's no way of knowing exactly what will happen until it's over. But we've been through worse, right?" He smiled at her.

"Yes." She smiled back, but it was forced.

"Are you sure there isn't anything else bothering you? You seem..I don't know, just sort of off today."

Eleven took her time before answering. "Hopper says I have to choose a name. I have to have Jane because that's what my paper says, but he says I don't have to use that name."

"He's right," Mike responded, not understanding why this weighed heavily on Eleven's mind. "Lots of people have a real first name that they don't use. They go by a middle name or a nickname. It doesn't have to be a big deal, just pick whatever you like best."

His intent was to relieve her anxiety over what seemed like it ought to be a fairly straightforward choice. Instead, she turned her head and stared at a random point off on the horizon.

"Ok," he ventured after realizing his misstep, "I'm not sure what I said wrong, but I obviously upset you."

"Can't explain," she said quietly.

"Just try. Take it slow."

She thought for a long moment, trying to find the words. "If someone took your name away...to make you not a person, you would know a name is important."

And there it was. Try as he might to be sensitive to her past, he didn't always get it. "You're right. I didn't think about it like that."

"I should have been Jane," she continued in an far away voice.

"If that's what you want, then we can use Jane."

"I *should* have been Jane," she reiterated, "but I'm not. I tried. With Kali. But I'm not Jane anymore. But I don't want Mama to be sad."

"Ok, look," Mike tried attacking the issue like a problem to be solved. "Obviously a name is more than just a name to you. It's an identity. You're not rejecting your mom by choosing a different name, you're just accepting who you are now. Does that help?"

"Eleven is part of who I am now. Not a good part."

And because loving someone sometimes means challenging them to think about uncomfortable things, he asked, "Can I ask you a question? It's kind of a jerk question that you might not want to answer. Hell, you might not be able to answer it, but I need to ask."

"Ok?"

"Why do you still call Brenner, Papa? If you think of names as identities, why give him that identity? He was never a father to you, he doesn't deserve it."

"It's...complicated," she stole Hopper's favorite response when he wanted to dodge a particularly pointed question.

"Ok, well, I'm not going to push you on it," Mike said, backing off before Eleven got really upset, "but just think about it. At some point, you should put him behind you."

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Eleven was typically energized and almost euphoric following a visit with Mike. But this time she was quiet and not sad so much as serious and contemplative. Hopper had watched them talking and it was evident even from a distance that the conversation had been deep, but it didn't appear angry.



"You ok, kid?"

"Just...," she paused before finishing, "...thinking."

And then she went back to being quiet, turning inward to sort through her thoughts. Why did Papa still get to be Papa? Titles were a sort of name that not only gave an identity, they showed that a person was important. She understood that the kids addressed adults by last name because it was respectful. For the same reason, Jonathan notably called his father by his first name refusing to allow him the honor of a parental title. Will did not follow Jonathan's example, not quite as ready to write the man off. She knew she still felt a connection to Papa, but for the first time, she really started to question that and wanted to understand her own feelings.

When angry red hand prints marred her pale, thin legs, they did not come from Papa. When she was denied food until she was weak from hunger, he always brought her first meal. He was never the person to strap her down to an examination bed when she became uncooperative, he was the one who released her from the thick leather straps that bit into her skin. He brought her gifts, he did not take them away. He was not the one who bruised her arms while dragging her kicking and screaming towards the small room that terrified her, he was the one who lifted her exhausted, shivering form from the corner where she'd tried in vain to hide from the darkness. He never so much as raised his voice to her and he was the only person who ever held her, ever comforted her, ever praised her.

In her world, harsh punishments were the inevitable effect of failure, willful or not. When Papa's eyes would darken, she knew what was coming, but she did not think of it as something he did to her. Papa was always disappointed to find her with welts and bruises. He would touch them gingerly and croon "Oh, Eleven. You shouldn't make them do these things to you." As though she was in control of the situation. As though he hadn't ordered her mistreatment and then watched as it was carried out, waiting for her to become submissive before he rescued her. And then, because she wanted to please him, to earn his attention, she would obediently whisper a meek, "Yes, Papa" and accept the blame for his abuse.

But she did not hold Papa responsible. Not then, anyway. As far as

she knew, he was the only one from whom she could expect any kindness and he had planned it that way. He made himself her only port in the storm he created. And even after she learned what he did and how calculated his manipulations were, there was a part of her that still craved his affection and approval.

Mike was wrong when he said that Papa was never a father to her. He was never a *good* father to her, but he helped make her into her. She could hate him all she wanted, it wouldn't change the fact that she would not be who she was without him. She couldn't erase him from her identity by removing his name...or hers.

"I've decided," she told Hopper and he tried to pretend he wasn't startled by her habit of starting conversations in the middle of a thought as though he was privy to what was going on in her mind.

"Decided what?"

"My name," she said simply. "I'm keeping El."

Hopper was perplexed why this had been such a complex decision for her, but he let it go. "Ok then," he said simply, "that's that then."

Yes, she thought, she was El. Never really Jane and no longer Eleven, even though those identities were still part of her.

Papa, whether he deserved it or not, was Papa.

And Hopper, she would have to keep thinking about.

## 25. Chapter 25

**A/N Because I feel like I left them hanging ten updates ago, some follow up on the Max vs Neil conflict.**

Ever since the Spring Break Incident, as Max thought of it, Neil had kept an icy distance. True to his word, Hopper made sure Neil knew he was being watched. Hopper randomly showed up at the school to talk to Max and the boys in full view of Billy every few weeks which kept Neil on edge. He also followed Neil whenever he happened to see him driving around town waiting for a reason to pull him over. And even when Hopper didn't have a reason to pull Neil over, he did it anyway.

The criminal case went exactly as Hopper had predicted. The District Attorney wanted to toss it and call it a "family matter," but couldn't because of the confession detailed in Hopper's police report and Max's visible injury. So instead, Neil was offered a deal: keep his nose clean and his hands off of Max for a year and it would all go away. Violate those conditions and it's thirty days of jail (go directly to jail, do not pass go, do not collect \$200). "Probation" is what Hopper had called it when he sat Max down and explained it to her. "A completely bullshit slap on the wrist" is what she called it. He didn't disagree.

But whether it was the fact that Neil had thought probation meant he'd gotten away with it or that it was summer break and Hopper couldn't just show up at the school to talk to Max anymore, the icy distance was starting to thaw and Max knew it was only a matter of time before Neil retaliated against her.

Max's summer break routine was to get up early on weekends to leave the house as soon as possible and to sleep late on weekdays to avoid before work contact with Neil. It wasn't unusual for her to wake up to an empty house with Neil at work, Susan out running errands and Billy doing whatever the hell Billy did when he wasn't home. An empty house was a peaceful house, so she was determined to take advantage of the lazy morning. A cassette tape was sitting in the bottom of her backpack waiting for Max to record something for Eleven, so she fixed herself a quick breakfast and figured she'd finish that tape before heading to the arcade to systematically unseat her

friends' top scores.

The party had gotten El through the basics and now they were spending the summer reviewing their 8th grade classes for her. There would still be gaps, but the plan had worked well enough that Eleven could move on to 9th grade and not be completely in over her head.

Max settled onto her bed, pulled out her notes for social studies, popped the cassette tape into her tape player and hit record. "Alright El, time to learn about ancient Greece. Super thrilling stuff so just try to stay awake, ok?"

Max wasn't very far into the recording when her door opened unexpectedly. She shot off the edge of her bed and stood, ready to try to dart out the room if necessary (or possible). She looked at the clock and realized time had gotten away from her and Neil must have decided to come home over his lunch hour.

"I heard voices, Maxine," His tone was dangerous. "Who were you talking to?"

"No one," Max replied, not intending to offer any explanations for the tapes.

"You're lying." His voice was emotionless which was much more unnerving than if he were yelling. A sick feeling settled into the pit of her stomach and she chose not to answer because she couldn't think of any response that wouldn't make the situation worse. Neil walked into her room, looked behind her door, opened her closet and knelt down to check under her bed. He was checking to see if she'd hidden anyone in her room. No, not anyone, she amended mentally. *Lucas*. As though she would risk his life by bringing him to her house when there were so many places in town they could go to avoid adult oversight.

"There's no one here," she told him when he'd finished his sweep of her room.

Neil still wasn't satisfied. He set eyes on her walkie talkie and examined it. It was turned off because although she used it when she felt like it, Dustin was addicted to the stupid thing and she didn't

need him trying to make contact at inopportune moments. "I know what I heard, Maxine. I'm going to ask you one last time. Who were you talking to?"

"No one," she repeated.

"You use this to talk to those boys, don't you?" He dropped the radio to the floor, but she knew it was sturdy and wouldn't break. Neil walked toward her and she didn't even realize she had been backing up until she hit the wall. He towered over her, his voice cold and controlled. "Do you have any idea what that looks like? A young girl running around with a bunch of boys? I'm not going to tolerate it, Maxine. I'm not going to have a whore for a daughter."

Generally, when a person feels threatened, they slip into fight or flight mode and make quick judgments focused on short term survival. Given that, it was a rather unusual time for Max to have an epiphany, but in that moment everything became crystal clear to her. Hopper had been wrong. The trick to getting Neil to leave her alone was not for Hopper to intimidate him, to out bully the bully. If anything, it only motivated Neil to continuously look for the opportunity to regain his Alpha Male status (such as surprising Max by coming home in the middle of the day to catch her doing something). If she was going to make it through the next four years, she was going to have to handle Neil on her own and not rely on anyone else. To make that happen, she was going to need leverage and it was then that it occurred to Max that the tape recorder was still going. It further occurred to her that Neil was easily provoked and still on probation. "Good thing I'm not your daughter then," she said staring him straight in the eye, daring him to do something about it.

Max always thought that the phrase "seeing red" for a person who becomes suddenly and uncontrollably angry was inaccurate. Really it ought to be "seeing black" because that's what it looked like from the outside. She knew when she said it that mouthing off to her stepfather would push Neil over the edge, she started to rethink her plan when she saw the change come over his face.

As fast as a snake striking its prey, he grabbed her face around her jaw to force her to make eye contact while he leaned in until their

noses were practically touching. She could smell the stale coffee on his breath and her stomach turned. "I think it's time you and I talked about respect, Maxine."

Mindful of the tape recording and the fact that Neil grabbing her face didn't make any sound, Max whined, "You're hurting me." She struggled to get free or at least knock something over. Something that would make some noise.

Neil released his grip on her face and grabbed her by the upper arm instead. He lifted her up so that she was forced onto the balls of her feet and shoved her against the wall while she was taken off her balance. And even though she felt like a complete wimp for doing it, she yelped for the sake of the tape.

"I will *not* be lied to, do you understand me?"

She didn't respond so he shoved her against the wall again. Again she cried out but she didn't give him the verbal response she knew he wanted. Neil wouldn't back down until he felt like he'd regained power and things hadn't gone quite far enough yet for Max's purposes. She was walking a fine line and she knew it, but it was too late to turn back now. "I asked you a question. Do you understand me?"

When she still didn't answer, he drew back his hand and Max flinched, bracing herself for contact. Neil thought twice about potentially leaving another mark across her face and instead he used his grip on her arm to spin her around and he rained a succession of loud slaps on the backs of her thighs. Her first thought was that she was too damn old for this bullshit, but at least there was finally something to make a good recording. She'd done a hell of a lot more damage to herself learning to skateboard, so she figured Neil must have been mindful enough to hold himself back. A condition of Neil's probation was no physical discipline of Max whatsoever, so even if it wasn't over the top, she still had him dead to rights. He probably assumed that as long as he left no physical evidence, he was in the clear. Max knew better.

Having gotten what she needed and being justifiably concerned that Neil might just escalate things if she didn't give in soon, she waived

the proverbial white flag even though it made her want to throw up in her mouth a little to do it. Max choked out a fake sob and whimpered an apology and, sure enough, Neil bought her act and spun her back around to face him thinking he'd won. His goal was control and dominance and so long as she was willing to give that to him, he didn't see a need to continue. "I trust we've reached an understanding?"

"Yes, sir," she dutifully responded surpressing the urge to gag on the words. She considered joining the drama club next year as a potential survival skill.

He pushed her to the floor for good measure before walking away. "You're grounded until further notice. Don't leave the house, don't use the phone, don't even think about turning on the TV," he looked around the room for her walkie talkie that he picked up and tucked under his arm, "and you can forget about this."

She watched him walk out of her room, closing the door behind him before she stood up and walked over to the tape player and hit the stop button. "Asshole," she muttered under her breath, flipping him off through her closed door.

Max waited to leave the house for a good half hour after Neil left to go back to work to make sure he wasn't just waiting to see if she was going to sneak out. With the incriminating tape in her back pocket, she took off for Lucas's house to make copies and plan out her blackmail more thoroughly.

## 26. Chapter 26

A/N Some feedback after the last chapter. On the one hand, I think Max is a strong character and because she came into a domestic violence situation as an adolescent, I think she would be less fatalistic about it than someone like Billy who had always lived with it. But on the other hand, let's be honest with ourselves: she's a child going toe to toe with an adult who fights dirty.

Hopper pulled up to the station and saw Murray Bauman's familiar van. It was only the fear of what he might be saying to people inside the station that prevented Hopper from just driving right past.

"Jim," Murray pounced on him the moment he walked in the door.

"Why are you here?" Hopper's voice was tired and annoyed.

"We need to talk," he said meaningfully.

"Make it quick," Hopper walked passed Murray towards his office, not checking to see if he followed. And of course he followed.

"I know you had something to do with it," Murray accused as soon as the door was shut.

"Something to do with what, Murray?"

"My missing person case conveniently solves itself right after I talk to you."

"That's wonderful," Hopper's cheerful reply was laced with sarcasm, "glad the kid was found. He doing ok?"

"He's on his third round of rehab, I'm sure he'll take off again as soon as he's out."

"So cynical," Hopper shook his head and tisked, "Don't you have any aliens to hunt down? Spies, maybe?"

"Given what you know, I would think you'd be more open to hearing



the truth. Besides, you know you'd miss me if I went away."

"Doubt it. I'm a damn good shot."

"And here I brought you a gift even though you don't deserve it," Murray ignored the threat and removed a file from his battered leather case. He tossed it on the desk, desperate to show off to someone. "I figured you'd want some history on the child. These fell into my hands from someone whose conscience got the best of him a week before he jumped out a tenth story window."

"Yeah? Who?"

"Never gave me a name. He claimed to be a low level lackey just following orders. But here's the interesting part. There's someone out there systematically hunting down anyone associated with Brenner's program. They're making it look like random home invasions and street crime, but it's clearly CIA trying to get rid of anyone who knows anything. I guess this guy decided he wanted to go out on his own terms."

"What makes you think it's CIA?" Hopper carefully concealed any reaction that might clue Murray into the fact that Hopper knew who was likely behind the killings and it was about as far from being the CIA as you could get.

"Mind control. The CIA uses LSD induced hallucinations to get people to commit suicide or crimes or whatever suits their needs at the moment. Just watch your back...and your water supply."

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For some time after Murray left, Hopper sat at his desk, paging through the file, trying to wrap his brain around the very clinical nature of the papers before him that reduced to black and white the systematic abuse of the girl currently sitting in his grandfather's cabin, no doubt watching nonsense on television, listening to tapes of her friends or envisioning the day when she would be fully integrated into mainstream society. In her charts, right along side mundane

statistical information such as height, weight and blood pressure were notes about her responses to fear and to pain and how that impacted her test results as though purposefully inflicting that on a child was just another piece of empirical data. It reminded him of reading an autopsy report except this wasn't a dead body, this was a child. More so than that, this was *his* child every bit as much as Sara was.

"I'm heading out," he told Flo absently and she reflexively handed him his keys. "Something I need to take care of."

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"Ok, before you listen to this, you have to promise me you're not going to freak. It sounds a lot worse than it was because I totally embellished. Just remember that." Max and Lucas were sitting on his bedroom floor, the incriminating tape loaded into one side of Lucas's dual cassette player, a blank tape on the other side.

"You still haven't actually told me what happened," Lucas pointed out. Max had been very cryptic since she showed up on his front porch about ten minutes earlier.

"Neil came home for lunch and surprised me while I was recording a school tape for El. I didn't turn off the tape recorder so I figured it was an opportunity to get proof of him breaking his probation. Now I've got him over a barrel, I just need copies of the tape so that I know it's secure, ok? Just don't freak out."

"Ok fine, I won't freak out."

Max cued the tape until right before Neil walked into the room, so that anything about Eleven's ancient Greece lesson wasn't included and hit play on one side and record on the other. Lucas reminded himself several times that Max was currently fine so she had to be telling the truth about embellishing the tape, but it was still extremely hard to listen to.

"I don't know," he told her when it was over, "Don't you think we

should tell Hopper?"

"If we tell Hopper, he'll want to use the tape now," Max reasoned. "Neil will do thirty days in jail and lose his job." She hadn't wanted Hopper to do anything the last time, she warned him he would only make things worse, but he refused to listen to her. She sure as hell wasn't going back to him now.

"I guess so but—"

"Plus," she interrupted, "he'll be even more pissed at me but after he gets out, he won't be on probation anymore."

"Why is that a big deal?"

"Because, Lucas. It's not illegal to hit your kids as long as you don't leave bruises. The only reason this is a big deal," she indicated the tape player, "is because it violates his probation. What happened today proves how he's going to treat me and I don't want to deal with the same shit he does to Billy. I just need to let him know I have it and that I'll turn him in if he doesn't leave me alone."

Lucas took a deep breath. He knew she was right. Hopper would absolutely haul Neil Hargrove in and then where would that leave Max? But at the same time, this felt dangerous. This felt like playing with fire. "Are you sure about this?"

"All I want is for things to go back to the way they were. I wish I had never said anything that day he went after my mom. It's all gotten out of control because I stood up for someone who obviously doesn't want help."

"Are you gonna be able to see your dad this summer? Maybe a little time away would be good."

"I doubt it. The custody orders say he has to pay to bring me to him, so he has to keep his shit together enough to make that happen. He always avoids my calls when he doesn't want to have to tell me he can't afford for me to come out and I haven't been able to get through to him for two weeks."

"What if you told Neil he had to leave you alone and buy you a plane

ticket to see your dad to keep you from turning him in?"

"That is not a bad idea, Stalker," and for the first time that day, Max smiled even if only slightly. "A little time in California sounds like heaven right now."

"Ok, so what's the next step in your grand plan?"

"Now I call him and drop the bomb. I don't want to do it in person, I don't know how he'll react."

Max dialed the number for the direct line to Neil at work. "Neil Hargrove," he answered.

"Hi Neil, it's Max." Her heart was racing to the point where she almost wondered if he could hear it over the phone, even though she knew that didn't make any sense.

"Maxine," she could tell by his voice that he was working hard to restrain himself in case they were overheard by his coworkers, "Why are you calling me at work?"

"Because I wanted you to hear something," she put the phone to the speaker of the cassette player and hit play. When it was over, she put the phone back to her ear, "I know that violates your probation and I know what that means. I have multiple copies of the tape in different places for safe keeping."

Neil was silent on the other end of the line and Max gave it a minute before she continued.

"All I want is a truce. Send me to my dad's for a month so we can all get a break from each other and then you and I can go back to the way things were. I'll stay out of your way and not backtalk you and you just leave me alone. If we can just do that, then I'll never play that tape for anyone else."

Neil remained silent for some time before he finally told her, "I'll be home at 5:30. I trust you'll be there since you're grounded and aren't supposed to leave the house."

"I'll be there."

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Max made sure she was home well before 5:30 so that she was seated at the kitchen table when Neil walked in the door. He ignored her initially and she similarly said nothing. Eventually he sat down across from her and stared her down before telling her, "You wanted a plane ticket to see your dad, that's what you're getting. You leave tomorrow."

"When am I back?" she asked.

"You're not. If you don't want to be a part of this family, then you won't. It's that simple."

"What about my mom?" the panic started to build in Max's chest. Her mom was gone when she got home. She hadn't seen her all day.

"What about her?" Neil said as though this were the plainest thing in the world, "She lives here, you're choosing to leave."

"I want to talk to her." Max very nearly didn't recognize her own voice.

"She's not here and she doesn't want to talk to you. She's very hurt by your decision. I'm taking you to the airport in the morning, we need to leave at 6:00 am to make your flight so I suggest you go pack your things. I had better not see you set so much as a single toe outside that room until we leave in the morning."

Neil continued to sit at the table, looking expectantly at Max. For her part, Max left the kitchen table in silence, completely stunned. Yes, she wanted away from Neil, yes, she wanted to see her dad, but did her mom really not want to talk to her? Not even to say goodbye before she left? Neil had said she wasn't coming back, but did he mean *ever*? Was this just...it?

She looked around her room wondering if she should pack clothes for a week or a month or assume that she would never see anything she left behind again. He might be bluffing, she still hadn't talked to her dad in weeks. She couldn't call him to find out without getting

caught.

With no knock or warning, her door swung open and Billy let himself in her room. He was headed off to college in the fall, but for reasons she couldn't fathom, he stuck around for the summer.

"I hear you got yourself a one-way ticket back to California," his tone was contemptuous and smug as usual. "Well done."

"Leave me alone, Billy. I have to pack."

"You know once you leave, you're done, right?" he taunted her.

"My mom will want to see me," but she was not at all confident in this statement.

"Let me ask you something, how long has it been since you've seen your dad, huh? Your mom cut your dad off because my dad doesn't play well with others. You think it will be any different going the other direction? I haven't had so much as a phone call from my mom since I was nine. When you're dealing with Neil Hargrove, it's either all or nothing."

Billy let that sink in, enjoying watching Max's predicament because it wasn't his own.

"Well, I guess it's been nice knowing you," he said as he walked out of her room.

Why did she think this was a good idea? She should never have played the tape for Neil. She could have let him think he'd won and then only used it if she really needed it. She stood in the middle of her room looking back and forth between her partially packed suitcase and the closed door.

Her options were to let Neil take her to the airport and try to get her mom to talk to her once she was in California or to go back out there and beg Neil to let her stay. If she left, she might be giving up any chance of a relationship with her mom. If she stayed, she would be waiving the white flag and be completely under Neil's thumb. Her mother was the reason she was in this mess to begin with, she thought angrily. Her weakness, her refusal to stand up for Max, her

decision to become completely dependent on such a controlling person.

Max stood with her hand on the doorknob paralyzed with indecision: sacrifice herself for the benefit of her mother or take the risk of finding out whether her mother would make the same sacrifice for her benefit?

## 27. Chapter 27

A/N First off, I don't like to leave people hanging so at least I try not to do it for long hence the mid-week update. When there's a natural break, there's a natural break. Also, I'm realizing things have gotten kind of heavy for something that's supposed to be plotless and fluffy, so I'll be changing up the pace a bit after this conflict resolves.

Thought for today: Parentification.

One of the consistent ST themes is parent/child relationships and within those relationships, we see a lot of examples of parentification (in a nutshell: a role reversal wherein the child takes on a care giving role towards the parent because for various and sundry reasons, there is a parental void to fill). The most obvious examples are Jonathan taking over for Lonnie (always) and Joyce (occasionally, mostly in S1) and Dustin (who's mother is very sweet, but pretty childlike overall), but nearly all of the characters have a family dynamic ripe for parentification.

There were a couple of comments along the lines of (paraphrased) WTF is wrong with Susan, but you have to look at her within the context of the relationship with Neil. We're given minimal background information on her, but realistically, in order for Susan to react to Neil and Billy the way she does in S2E9 and for Max to react the way she does to Billy throughout S2, at some point along the way, Susan was conditioned to make peace with an aggressor even at personal cost but Max was not. My assumption then, is that whatever happened to Susan, predated her relationship with Max's father but left her with a learned response to aggressive/abusive behavior nonetheless. When trying to interact with a narcissist (Neil, Billy, Brenner...), you usually see one of two responses: fight or appease.

Max and Billy are both fighters, though they will both resort to appeasement when they know they're beaten. Susan is a conflict avoiding appeaser. It sucks for Max and leaves Max in the role of being her mother's protector instead of the other way around,



but the need to fill the peacemaker role in response to an abuser doesn't come out of nowhere. You tend to see it in adult children of alcoholics and people who grew up with family violence. So yeah, Susan is an utterly inadequate parent in many respects, but she's more damaged than weak (even though Max would lack the perspective to see her that way at this stage of the game).

Anyway, enough amateur psychology for the day. Unless you *want* to talk about it, in which case turn on your PMs because I can chat for days.

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Max forced herself to step away from the bedroom door and not make a rash decision. She hadn't seen her mother all day and it was always possible that Neil was playing head games with her when he tried to convince her that her mother didn't want to see her. It certainly wasn't something she would put past him. Max finished packing her bag and sat with her ear to the door, waiting for her mother to come home before deciding what to do. Even though she knew it was unrealistic, Max couldn't stop herself from entertaining a fantasy in which her mother found out what had gone on that day, told Neil to go to hell, and drove away with Max. That was where the fantasy got fuzzy because even in her imagination, Max knew there was no next place to go. Finally, she heard her mother's voice and looked at the clock. 6:28 pm. What in the hell kept her away from the house so long?

It was impossible to make out exactly what was being said, but Max could guess based on the muffled tones and the occasional word that was enunciated clearly and loudly enough for her to hear. After several minutes of bland conversation, her mother's voice went from insistent to upset at the same time Neil's voice got progressively louder and more angry. She heard her name several times and it seemed at least possible that her mother was just learning that Neil was planning to take her to the airport tomorrow.

The argument ended with her mom in tears, but still she didn't come

for Max. The little fantasy Max had been playing in her mind was unrealistic to start with, but was fading more and more quickly as the evening progressed. Once again, Neil had pitted himself against Max and once again, her mother had chosen Neil over her. Or more accurately, she had convinced herself she wasn't really choosing between Neil and Max. Max knew her mother thought she was as powerless as Max actually was, so while it was disappointing to have her mother accept Neil's behavior, it was at least a little comforting to know that she wasn't ready to cut Max out in the way Neil and Billy had led her to believe.

When you got right down to it, Max had asked for time away (demanded it, actually), and she was getting it. If she had to suck it up later and swallow her pride in order to be allowed to come back, she'd deal with that when the time came. Her mother could fend for herself for a little while, but it occurred to Max that if Neil was willing to tell her that her mother didn't want her, he'd probably tell her mother the same thing in reverse. Max was sure she could call her friends easily once she got to her dad's house and let them know what really happened, but she worried that her mom might be harder to reach by phone. She dug through her 8th grade school materials she had shoved onto the shelf at the top of her closet until she found a spiral notebook with several blank pages at the back. She tore them out and began her letter.

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"You're late," Eleven wasn't mad enough to make Hopper wait on the cabin's front porch before she let him in, but she was irritated enough to call him out on it as soon as he walked in the door.

"What are you talking about? It's barely 6:30, that's not late." He *was* late and he knew it, he just didn't want to admit it.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Maybe we should make 'late' *your* word of the day since you don't know what that means."

"Alright, smart ass, point taken." It occurred to him that the snarky sense of humor he found endearing probably wouldn't go over so well

once Eleven was in school, but he wasn't about to give up on having a sparring partner. The school could just learn to deal with her. "Listen, kid, there's something I need to talk to you about."

"Bad?" he noticed the instant change in her demeanor and her conditioned response pained him.

"No, not bad. You know, you don't have to worry every time I tell you we have something to talk about."

She nodded in acceptance, but continued to appear wary. He couldn't really blame her. Being both creatures of habit, they assumed their respective Serious Conversation positions: her on the sofa, him in the adjacent arm chair.

"Remember how last year after you came back and I told you I should have done things different? That I should have been more honest with you? I'm trying to do things right this time, ok?," He started off hesitantly, still concerned about how she would react before he bit the bullet just laid it all out. "Murray Bauman brought me a file from the lab. He got it from a guy who knew Kali was after him, so she's not flying under the radar like she thinks she is. The file looks like medical charts and records from some experiments they did on you. I thought about not telling you because I didn't want you to have to relive all that and I was afraid you'd want to run off and warn Kali and get into God knows what kind of mess while you're at it. But then I figured maybe that's not fair for me to just decide all that for you. So I have the file and its yours to do what you want with it. Read it, burn it, stuff it in a box and put it under the cabin with all the other boxes. Your choice. As for Kali, that's something we decide together because that's a safety thing."

Eleven sat quietly, her expression unreadable. Hopper had grown mostly used to her unusual tolerance for long silences, but under the circumstances, this one unnerved him.

"I can warn Kali in the Void," she said slowly.

Hopper preferred contact between the two of them to be kept to a minimum because Eleven was particularly susceptible to being guilt tripped and he didn't trust the other girl's thirst for vengeance, but he

was relieved that Eleven wasn't proposing she talk to her in person. He nodded his approval and she returned to quiet contemplation.

"Did you?" she finally asked hesitantly and gently, as though she was taking care not to upset him.

"Did I what?"

"Read them?"

"Yeah, kid, I did."

"You ok?"

That caught him off guard. "Am I ok?"

"Bothers you to know," she explained.

"Christ," he muttered to himself as he realized his past errors in how he'd responded to her. "I'm sorry, kid, I just keep screwing up with you." She looked at him quizzically, not understanding where he thought he'd gone wrong. "What bothers me is the fact that they *did* this shit to you in the first place, not me *finding out* about it now. Yeah, it pisses me off, but I have plenty of practice being pissed off. It's one of the few things I'm actually good at."

They shared a weak smile.

"Look, I can't change what happened. I wish like hell I could, but I can't. But what I can do now is let you just be a kid for once in your damn life. You don't have to try to protect me from information or worry about me, let me handle all that."

"No," she was resolute.

"No?"

"No. You said my paper made us each other's. So you take care of me and I take care of you."

"I can take care of myself, you know."

"So can I," she reminded him. "This is better."

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"Alright, Maxine," Neil announced as he opened her door, "Let's go."

It was early, but Max had already been up for a couple hours. Even though it made no sense, she was sure Neil meant it when he said he had better not see her out of her bedroom. It was exactly the sort of thing he'd do to Billy: give him an impossible set of directions and then be pissed when Billy couldn't follow them. Max just made sure she was up long before Neil so she could sneak down the hall to the bathroom and get something to eat undetected. By the time he came for her at 6:00 am, she was packed, ready to go and not starving.

"I want to talk to my mom first," Max insisted, testing the waters.

"She's sleeping and we need to get going."

"I want to at least tell her goodbye before I go."

Neil pushed past her to grab her suitcase. "I already told you she's sleeping and if you wake her up, you're going to have a very uncomfortable flight."

Max reminded herself that being cooperative now was a means to an end. She could get her break and once the dust settled enough for the truce to be Neil's idea instead of hers, he would let her come back rather than risk pushing her mother too far. One day, she'd actually walk out the door for good and tell him off on her way out. But not today.

It was a long and incredibly awkward drive to the Indianapolis Airport. Eventually, Max pretended to fall asleep to have an excuse for zoning out. She was slightly surprised when Neil actually handed her a plane ticket at the curb, thinking there was a chance that this was all an elaborate ruse to get her to give in and cry uncle. "Don't miss your flight," were his only parting words before dropping her suitcase next to her on the sidewalk leaving Max to navigate the airport on her own.

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Lucas was worried about what happened to Max when she went home to meet Neil the previous evening, but, not having a death wish, he knew he had to wait for her to contact him and not the other way around. He spent the morning at home figuring that if he waited long enough for Neil to go to work, Max would be able to sneak out or at least make a call without getting caught. When she didn't call by late morning, he got on his bike to check the usual haunts to see if she was hiding out, but that was also a bust. He returned home to find the answering machine light blinking. *Finally.*

"Hey Lucas, it's Max. I just wanted to call and let you know everything's ok. This is going to sound totally crazy, but I'm at LAX waiting for my dad to pick me up. I don't have a number you can call me at, so I'll call back at 7:30 your time. If you get this message in time, just try to be home then. Bye."

*What the...?*

When the phone rang at the Sinclair residence that evening, Lucas dove for the receiver before Erica could get ahold of it.

"Hello?" he answered a little breathlessly.

"Lucas?"

"Max! What happened? How did you end up in California?"

"Well, I *did* tell Neil he had to send me to see my dad or I'd turn him in."

"Ok, true but no one said it had to be the next day. So does that mean he's accepted your truce?"

"Well...", she hesitated, "that's still kind of a work in progress."

"What does that mean?"

"He told me this was a one-way ticket and I'm not allowed to come

back." Somehow this threat seemed a lot less realistic from a thousand miles away than it did in the moment. It did not seem at all unrealistic to Lucas who had a moment of panic.

"What do you mean? Like, ever?"

"I'm pretty sure he's bluffing."

"Pretty sure?"

"Yeah, my dad thinks I'm only here for the summer and I don't think my mom is on board at all. She and Neil got in an argument before I left and she was pretty upset."

"What did she say to you?"

"Nothing because Neil never let me talk to her."

Lucas relaxed slightly hearing that. "Well that's kind of a dead giveaway."

"I know, right? He would have loved it if she were willing to tell me off personally, so if he wouldn't let us talk, it must have been he didn't like what he thought she'd say."

"Ok, so now what?"

He could clearly envision her shrug her shoulders as she said, "All Neil really wants is to feel like he's won so I figure after a month or so, I'll be all sorry and shit and ask if I can come back so I'm there in time for school."

"This is totally messed up, you realize that, right?"

"You think?" she asked in good natured sarcasm.

"But," he went on, looking for a silver lining, "at least in the meantime, you get a break, right?"

"Yes and I totally needed this. I have to get off the phone now because it's long distance but tell everyone hi for me and that I'm ok."

"Bye, Madmax."

"Bye, Stalker."

Lucas hung up the phone and wandered absent mindedly into the den where his father was reading the paper.

"You ok, son?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm ok." Lucas paused awhile before admitting, "Sometimes I just wish my friends had better parents."

Mr. Sinclair nodded silently. He avoided gossip as a general rule, but he couldn't help knowing that the Byers and Henderson boys all had absent fathers. Ted Wheeler was physically in the home, but always seemed to be mentally checked out. A missing father was a difficult burden for a young man to bear and though he tried to keep his mind on his own family, Mr. Sinclair was sympathetic to his son's friends.

"Anyone in particular?"

"Max. She's good right now," he followed up quickly when his father raised a concerned eyebrow, "She's in California visiting her dad. But..." Lucas trailed off, not quite sure how to describe it.

"It's hard to watch someone you care about struggle and not really be able to help," his father suggested.

"Yeah."



## 28. Chapter 28

**Apologies for the slow update. Life and stuff.**

"There's no way around it, you're just gonna have to do it," Hopper told her over dinner.

"No," Eleven told him flatly.

"You can tell me no all you want, it doesn't change anything."

"Still no."

Hopper exhaled and rolled his eyes. On some level, he celebrated her newfound assertiveness and it was certainly better than when she first came to the cabin and was constantly walking on eggshells around him, but at the moment, he really just wanted to play the *"because I said so"* paternal trump card and have that be the end of it.

"Look. Do you want to go to school or not?"

She glared at him awhile before grinding out a reluctant, "Yes."

"Well then, you need to do the testing or else the school isn't going to know what to do with you. We've gotten this far, but none of us really know what the hell we're doing and I'm not sending you there only to set you up for failure."

She stabbed at her dinner as though it had offended her and Hopper figured he'd just have to wait for her to get over being pissed off at the situation because nothing he could say was going to make it more palatable to her.

"Mike said he would go with me," she eventually broke the silence.

"Why am I not surprised?"

"Does that mean he can come?" she asked completely ignoring Hopper's sarcasm.

Hanging out with Mike Wheeler watching Eleven take a bunch of

assessments was not how he wanted to spend his day, but he knew an opportunity when he saw one. "If you agree to just take the tests and not give me a hard time about it, then yes. Is that fair?"

"No," she said sullenly, still clearly angry about the whole thing. "But its better."

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Evaluations were available to Eleven through the school district, but Hopper wanted to wait as long as possible to bring her out of hiding without leaving them unprepared to start the school year so he arranged her to do the testing with a private facility over the summer. He'd received a large, thick envelope in the mail with an overwhelming amount of paperwork to fill out.

"This is a much bigger pain in the ass than I thought it was going to be," he told Joyce while they sat at her kitchen table over coffee and cigarettes. "They want me to give them all this information on El and I can't give them any honest answers."

"Like what?"

"A lot of it's background stuff on her that I don't actually know and even the things I do know, I can't say. At least that part I can explain away with the story about Terry going catatonic, but there are also questions in there about how she reacts in certain social situations. I can't very well tell them she makes people piss themselves and then breaks their arms."

"In fairness," Joyce interrupted, "that was one kid and he deserved it."

"Of course he deserved it, but I can't tell people about it." He rubbed his forehead trying to will away the stress headache that was building.

"Do you have it with you? I'll help you make stuff up. It'll be like old times, helping you cheat on your homework."

"I don't remember you helping. *Distracting* maybe."

"Having second thoughts?" Joyce asked knowingly.

"No," he said too quickly and then amended after a moment, "Well yeah, but not really. I feel safer with her being hidden, but it's not what's good for her."

"Trust me. I get it."

"Yeah, I know you do. And on that topic..."

"What?" She asked, instantly suspicious.

"Last time I talked to Doc Owens, he said he wanted Will to have an MRI to make sure everything's ok."

He held up his hands in mock surrender in response to the look on Joyce's face. "Don't shoot the messenger, alright? I said I'd ask and now I've asked."

"Would you do it?"

"Honestly? No, but we both know I don't always make the smartest decisions. You're constantly worrying if that thing is back and when it took him over, it did show up on the MRI. It might give you peace of mind to get a clean scan."

"Tell him I'll think about it."

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Flo was expecting Hopper to have a court date or two in Curley County which made for a clean excuse to be out of pocket for a day. He took the opportunity to take Eleven with Mike in tow to Indianapolis for the day for her school assessment. Until they were safely out of Hawkins, Mike and Eleven were seated on the floorboards in the backseat of the Blazer with their heads below the window level which limited visibility to a narrow angle out the windows. Mike thought he spotted a familiar head walking down the sidewalk and raised up a little to confirm before he whispered to Eleven, "That's Max's stepdad."

Eleven checked to see that Hopper wasn't watching before she poked her head up. A slight jerk of her head and a large tree branch fell, striking Neil in the head and knocking him off his feet. Mike's eyes watered with the effort of suppressing a laugh, but Hopper caught on anyway.

"Did you seriously just do what I think you just did?"

"Tree branches break sometimes. It happens," El responded innocently.

"Did that one break on it's own?" He had figured out that El wouldn't lie, but she would absolutely give an evasive non answer if the question wasn't specific enough.

"No, but he doesn't know that."

"Don't do that kind of shit," he looked at her in the rear view mirror with as reproachful a look as he could muster under the circumstances before adding, "It's bad for the trees."

"Fine. I won't hit him with any more trees."

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The address for the testing facility took them to a 60's era, unremarkable looking, single story office building. Hopper pointed Eleven and Mike to a waiting room that had the sterile feel of a dental office while he checked El in.

"It's going to be fine," Mike told her and squeezed her hand reassuringly. She gave him a weak smile in reply. "Just remember, no one here can hurt you."

"What if I do really bad?"

"Then you get a lot of help once school starts which isn't such a terrible thing. If you get overwhelmed, try to just take a minute and picture yourself somewhere you feel comfortable."

She nodded, but he could tell she would still rather be anywhere else. Well, *almost* anywhere else. Maybe not the lab itself, but he was reasonably certain she might even take fighting Demodogs over this.

The three of them waited together for her to be called up but when Hopper and Mike made to follow her through the door to the left of the receptionist's desk, she stopped them.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we can't allow parents to be in the room while their children are being tested."

"Well, why in the hell not?" he barked at her.

"Because it might impact a child's results."

"You honestly think I'm going to go through all this trouble to get this set up and then help her cheat?"

Having been on the receiving end of Hopper's intimidation tactics, Mike had a bit of sympathy for the woman but also at least a twinge of schadenfreude. "I didn't say that. It's standard procedure. You don't want to invalidate the results of a test."

"It's ok." Eleven spoke up seeing that Hopper was clearly prepared to die on this particular hill.

"Are you sure?" Hopper asked.

"Yes. It's ok," she reassured him with obvious false bravado.

"Alright kid," Hopper told her reluctantly, "I ... *we'll* be right here waiting for you."

Mike and Hopper found their seats in the waiting room and settled in. It was an uneasy sort of boredom that reminded Mike of waiting in the hospital for Will to regain consciousness.

"Do you have any idea how long this is supposed to take?" Mike asked.

"All morning at least," Hopper looked displeased, but since grouchy was his default mode, it was hard to tell. "Some of it's untimed, so

they said it might go into the afternoon."

Mike regretted not bringing a book; Hopper wasn't exactly the best company for small talk. He settled for staring at a fish tank in need of cleaning.

"Listen, Mike. If you want to go take a walk around the block or something, it's not a big deal." Mike didn't realize until Hopper spoke that he had been nervously tapping his foot against the leg of the chair.

"No, I'm good." Mike sat up abruptly and forced his feet to stay planted on the floor. He had said he would accompany Eleven and even though he hadn't officially promised, he felt that was implied.

"Suit yourself."

Mike surveyed the available magazines and settled for a National Geographic with a cover feature on Afghanistan. The article failed to adequately distract him, so this time Mike broke the silence taking advantage of both the time they needed to kill and the fact that they would both be limited to incomplete sentences in a public place, "So. Have you thought about what I said about us going to her?"

Hopper raised an eyebrow at him and said, "We'll talk about it later."

Mike wasn't happy about being put off, but he took the fact that it wasn't an automatic no to be a positive sign and looked for a new magazine.

The first time the lights flickered, it was so quick that Mike wasn't confident he saw what he thought he saw. He looked up, waiting for it to happen again and when several minutes passed with nothing, he returned to reading. The second time it happened, he looked to Hopper for confirmation. The man was tense, his jaw clenched and he appeared as though remaining seated was an act of sheer will power.

"Do you think that was?" Mike didn't complete the question and he didn't have to. Hopper gave him a small nod in response.

The third time, Hopper was clearly done. He stood up and strode

through the door through which El had been led a couple hours prior ignoring the receptionist's repeated protestations. Mike ran behind him and they looked in windowed doors until they found El pale, slightly sweaty and looking like she was going to be ill.

"I found her!" Mike called to Hopper while he was opening the door. "El? Are you ok?"

She looked up at Mike and for a brief moment, it was almost as though she didn't recognize him and then a wave of relief came over her and the effect was visible. Tears welled in her eyes and she shook her head in a silent no.

"Alright, c'mon," Hopper said from behind Mike's shoulder, "You two go get in the car, I'll deal with this." The *before all hell breaks loose* remained implied. They walked swiftly towards the door, ignoring the building chatter of well meaning professionals trying to convince Hopper to bring Eleven back in.

They regrouped in the familiar safety of the Blazer to wait for Hopper, sitting side by side with El leaning on Mike's shoulder. Mike was reminded of sitting next to a very damp Eleven in the middle school gym.

"Feeling any better?"

"Some."

"Just take your time, ok?"

They watched Hopper walk out of the building and immediately light a cigarette as he approached the vehicle. "How are you doing?" he asked El as he entered the vehicle. She nodded at him without verbalizing a response. "Yeah, ok. Let's get out of here."

They drove in silence for awhile with no particular destination in mind other than "away" before Eleven asked, "Can I still go to school?"

"Of course you can."

"You said," she paused gathering her words, "I need the tests to go to

school."

"They can't turn you away," Mike chimed in. "Remember I told you, it's all just about how much help you need."

"I'll figure something out, don't worry," Hopper reassured from the front seat, "Also, if there's anything you want, now is a good time to ask me because I'm feeling guilty for sending you in there alone."

"I said it was ok."

"Doesn't matter, I shouldn't have gone along with it."

The sparkle returned to Eleven's eye. "Something...stupid?"



## 29. Chapter 29

It was a moment of weakness and guilt and a desperate need to see something other than fear and defeat in her eyes that caused him to make the open ended offer, one he regretted the moment Eleven asked if she could pick something stupid. She didn't even know what her options were, but she knew an opportunity when she saw one and she was going to make the most of it.

"How about moderately stupid?" He countered and she rolled her eyes in the way that let him know she thought he was being ridiculous but she was humoring him anyway. She was very practiced at that particular eye roll.

Mike threw out a few ideas before mentioning that Indianapolis had a zoo. After he explained what a zoo was and then assured her that it wasn't nearly as depressing as it sounded, Eleven was sold. Hopper was less than enthused at the idea, but he had to admit that it was a relatively safe choice as far as public outings went. The existing zoo was small and dated, making it badly attended. A new one had already been planned and approved with construction to begin the next summer. The promise of a bigger and better zoo made the old zoo even less desirable to most, but for them, the dwindling attendance was a positive.

Watching Eleven discover the world around her was one of Mike's favorite things. She always approached new experiences with a bit of trepidation, unsure what to think about even the basic things he took for granted. But that moment when she would finally decide to set caution aside and give into her curiosity was something Mike relished. Especially when he was the one who showed her something that made her eyes light up like a Christmas tree. Or the Byers' living room. Whichever. Going to a zoo was a wealth of new experiences for Eleven. Not just the animals, but the hot dog vendor and the guy who sold helium balloons. Everything around her was a novelty.

Hopper similarly indulged in the vicarious wonder of Eleven's explorations. He happily bought her cotton candy, just to watch the look on her face when she ate it. It's cliché to say that one of the great joys of parenthood is seeing the world through your child's

eyes, but the combination of Hopper dragging himself out of the cycle of self destruction (that was really a passive aggressive suicide attempt when he was willing to be honest with himself) and Eleven getting to experience life as something other than a science experiment made the old cliché particularly apt. They were both waking up to a second chance at life.

As he watched El take in sights around her, Hopper also started watching Mike. Or more specifically, he started watching Mike watching Eleven. His seemingly endless patience as he explained absolutely everything to her (and *good God*, that kid was a human encyclopedia). The way he beamed when he found something that made her smile. How his mere presence reassured her when she was facing the strange and unfamiliar (like walking into the mouth of a cartoonish concrete whale to access the aquarium. And then the aquarium itself with its massive water tanks and dim lighting that reminded her initially of the sensory deprivation chamber that started it all). And yet, despite having the very clear advantage in knowledge and experience, he did not patronize or infantilize her. It was apparent that Mike wanted only to share in the experience with her.

Whatever fears (or more accurately, prejudices based on his own behavior as a youth) Hopper had about teenage boys generally, seemed less and less applicable to Mike Wheeler specifically the more time Hopper spent around him. They were just kids sure, but he was finally convinced that this wasn't merely youthful infatuation. He thanked a God he was fairly certain he didn't believe in that of all the people El could have run into that rainy night she barely escaped from Benny's diner, she just happened to run into this particular kid.

"Hey, Mike?" Hopper called Mike over to him, taking advantage of Eleven being completely engrossed in watching a pair of black bears tearing into a cardboard box they'd been given.

"Yeah?" Mike responded absently.

"What you asked before? About you kids coming to visit on your own?"

"Yeah?" Mike's eyebrows shot up and he was now giving Hopper his

full attention.

"We're gonna need to talk about what sort of precautions you need to take, but I think we can work it out."

"*Seriously?*"

"Yeah. Not alone though, got it?" Hopper didn't need to spell out his warning.

"Safety in numbers?" Mike asked even though he knew full well why Hopper didn't want him out there on his own.

"Something like that." Hopper responded back humorlessly.

Hopper said nothing further but Mike lingered nearby for a moment before finally speaking. "Hey, Hopper?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks." Hopper just nodded slightly in response, but Mike continued in that halting way of his. "Not just this. Last fall, you just wanted me to understand. Well, just so you know, I get it. I had to get over being pissed off first, but I get it now. And I couldn't have kept her safe then. Not while everyone was looking for her. So I'm just glad she had you."

Having finally gotten it all of his chest, Mike looked about ten pounds lighter. Hopper absorbed what he'd said and the two of them just sat there for a moment processing the mutual understanding they'd adopted. Whatever else they might think about the other, they at least had one thing in common and that was enough. For now.

"We should start heading back," Hopper said after consulting his watch, looking for a way to end the conversation.

"Yeah," Mike agreed, "If I'm not home for dinner, my mom will start calling around for me."

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"You're sad," Eleven padded across the porch that was slightly spongy with decay to sit next to Hopper on the steps. Her feet were bare, her summer pajamas were thin, and hair was still damp from having taken a shower all of which amplified the coolness of the night air. She leaned into him for warmth, hugged his bicep like a security blanket and they both stared out into the night sky.

"Not exactly," he told her as he lit a cigarette. "More like nostalgic." She looked at him, raising her eyebrows in silent question. "It's when you think about something good from the past that you miss," he explained.

Eleven found this difficult to relate to considering that have good things in her life was a fairly recent development and none of them were really distant enough to warrant a feeling of nostalgia.

"What are you thinking?"

"I was thinking about how the last time I went to a zoo was when I took Sara."

"Tell me?" Hopper rarely volunteered stories about himself. Occasionally, something would strike him and he would give her a small tidbit, but the life he had before her was largely a mystery.

"Well, this was when I lived in New York," he started and paused, translating the amalgamation of memories into coherent words. Eleven's entire definition of New York was that it was the polar opposite of Hawkins and its where Hopper had lived his other life before the black hole took it all. "In the middle of the city is this great big park with a zoo where Diane and I used to take Sara. Her favorite was the monkey house even though it stank to high heaven. The last time I took her, a few of the monkeys had new babies that they carried around on their backs. They were the perfect combination of baby doll and stuffed animal and Sara couldn't take her eyes off them. She would have watched them all day if I hadn't bribed her with ice cream to get her out of there." He took a deep pull off his cigarette and in the light of the embers El could see his eyes were that mix of happy and sad that always happened when he talked about Sara. Nostalgic. Now she had a word for it.

"You don't talk about her much."

"No, I guess I don't."

"Why?"

He thought before answering, never really taking the time to consider it before. He was so oblivious to his own lack of transparency that he was genuinely surprised that night in November when he made reference to Sara and Eleven didn't know who she was. How long has he actually gone without saying her name? "I don't know, kid. I suppose you get used to keeping to yourself and then it's a habit."

Unlike the concept of nostalgia, this was definitely something to which Eleven could relate. "You can talk," she told him, "If you want." Sometimes her naivete made it easy to think of her as being very child-like and he would forget how much of an old soul she really was. And then she'd say something like that and he'd remember what his grandmother had said about still waters running deep.

"You too, you know." She shivered slightly and he wrapped his arm around her, pulling her in closer just in case it was the chilled air that made her shiver. It wasn't the air, but she was glad for the increased contact even though she didn't really need the extra warmth. She pressed her ear against his ribs and listened to his heart beat, steadying the well of unpleasant memories that wanted to accept his invitation and escape before she was ready for them to.

"So. Are you planning on telling me what happened that upset you so much this morning?"

Eleven wished Hopper had the ability to see the Void so she could just share memories that were too difficult to describe. How Papa realized she didn't speak well and tried to teach her to repeat back conversations she heard using nursery rhymes. How he would smile and tell her she was good when she got them right. How he would shake his head in disappointment and leave her to be punished for willfulness when she got them wrong. When she was good, it was very very good. When she was bad, it was horrid. She had tried so hard that morning, but the memories of Papa and the nursery rhymes made her chest hurt and her ears ring and she couldn't think. And

perhaps the man proctoring her test didn't mean to, but she could feel his frustration as he exhaled loudly through his nose and she thought maybe he would think she was being willful when really she was just nervous and frightened and overwhelmed with memories. When he exited the room and left her behind, no amount of reassurances from Mike that nothing bad would happen could convince her that stern faced men in scrubs weren't going to walk through the door to take her away. It was hard to breathe and hard to think and the effort it took to keep from crying made the lights flicker.

But Hopper couldn't see her memories and she couldn't describe them. Not when just thinking about it made her heart race and the words disappear and the air buzz with the sort of electricity that made your arm hair stand on end. So instead she just shook her head no.

"That's ok too, kid," he rested his chin on top of her head. He "You can talk, but you don't have to."

"Liked bears the best." She told him both ending the silence and turning the conversation back in a comfortable direction. "Remind me of you."

He smiled and laughed lightly. The kind of laugh that stayed inside his chest, but she was close enough to him that she heard it. "That so?"

They sat awhile longer until Hopper finished his cigarette and snubbed it out into the old and slightly rusted coffee can he kept on the front porch for that purpose. "Listen, kid. I'm gonna talk to Doc Owens. Maybe he has some ideas how to deal with this whole school thing without putting you through another day like today, ok?"

"Ok," she assented even though her feelings about Owens were mixed at best.

"Whatever we need to do, we'll figure it out."

## 30. Chapter 30

The following Saturday, Mike and Eleven were sitting one butt cheek each at her seat at the kitchen table and Hopper was seated across from them to lay out the summer version of the Don't Be Stupid rules. New and improved in their minds, new and terrifying in his.

"Alright you two," he started using his gruff, take no crap police voice, "these are the new rules. This isn't up for discussion, this just is the way it's going to be, clear?"

"Clear," they responded in unison.

"Mike, I'm depending on you to tell the others."

"No problem, Chief."

"I already told you, you don't come out here alone. Among other things, if anyone's watching you, it's suspicious because you wouldn't normally be wandering off on your own, you'd be hanging out with your friends."

"Do you think someone's watching?" Mike asked earnestly.

"Let's just leave it at I no longer know for a fact that someone's watching, but I'll always think there's a possibility."

"Isn't that the sort of thing Dr. Owens would know?" Mike thought that was the whole point of maintaining contact with Owens, so he could be their man on the inside.

"It's the sort of thing Dr. Owens *thinks* he would know, I'm not assuming Dr. Owens isn't kept in the dark on some things. You've gotta learn to err on the side of caution, Mike."

"Yeah, ok," he conceded. Even though Mike thought Hopper took things too far at times, this was a big loosening of the rules so he wasn't going to nit pick.

"By that same logic, you don't come straight here from one of your houses. Go somewhere else first, give it time, and only after you

know you aren't being watched or followed, then you can go to the cabin. When you leave, don't go directly home, either. And you don't always take the same route, got it?"

"Got it."

"You can't spend all your time here. Assume someone is watching. They'd notice if you guys never did any of the things you normally do and you don't normally spend all your time hiking through the woods. We're talking a couple times a week for a few hours, tops."

"We won't over do it. I swear." Hopper could tell by the look on her face that Eleven wasn't pleased with this limitation, but Mike would agree to walking over hot coals if that's what it took.

"Now, once you get here, you knock," Hopper continued.

"I know the knock," Mike reminded him. It wasn't as though he hadn't been doing this on a weekly basis for the last seven months.

"Yeah, well now there's a second one. If for any reason you need to tip her off without making it obvious, four quick knocks means you hide, got that El?"

"Yes," she affirmed, her irritation at the sheer number of new rules evident in her voice. "Four knocks, hide."

"And you don't do anything differently than you would do if I were here which means you have to stay inside."

"But -," Eleven began to protest and Hopper immediately cut her off.

"- No, El, I said this wasn't a discussion and I meant it. If we can go for a few weeks without raising any suspicion, then we can talk, but at least for now, staying inside is less conspicuous. Now," he turned to Mike seeing as how most of the burden of the new rules fell solely on him, "do you have all of that?"

"Don't come alone, don't come directly here, don't go directly home, change up our route, no more than twice a week for a few hours, four knocks if for some reason El should hide instead of opening the door and stay inside. Yeah, I'm pretty sure I can manage that. When can



we start coming?"

"Let's say Monday."

"Sure we can't go outside?" Eleven pleaded.

"Don't push it, kid. One big new risk at a time, alright?"

"It'll be ok, El," Mike reassured her, "We'll still have fun."

"Ok," she relented, albeit reluctantly. "Compromise."

It wasn't lost on Hopper that Mike had backed him up instead of Eleven. It also wasn't lost on him that Eleven accepted Mike's reassurance instead of Hopper's rationale.

"For today, since I brought Mike here and he didn't come on his own, you two can go head outside as long as you stay close enough so you can see the cabin, yeah?" He told himself that he offered up the outdoor visit because they really hadn't changed their status quo from the last time he let them spend time outside together. It had nothing whatsoever to do with him feeling Wheeler was gaining an edge when it came to Eleven's trust and loyalties. That's what he told himself, anyway.

"Yes!" Eleven agreed excitedly as she grabbed Mike by the wrist and pulled him out the door so quickly that he narrowly avoided tripping over his feet.

*Things were changing*, Hopper thought to himself. *And this was only the tip of the iceberg.*

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Even though Hopper had become a regular fixture at the Byers' home, returning home from a Sunday of errand running to find him waiting in her driveway always sent Joyce into a bit of a panic.

"Hey, Hop," she greeted him, trying to keep the worry out of her voice. She didn't, but he was kind enough to pretend not to notice.

"Everything ok?"

"Everything's fine, I just thought I might catch you at home."

"Sure, come on in." Not feeling free to talk over the phone was such a regular part of their lives, neither of them questioned the need to talk in person anymore. It was almost assumed.

He followed her into the living room and waited while she set down her things. Joyce noticed the flashing light of the answering machine and the glowing number four and a pit formed in her stomach. Today was the first day she had finally relented and allowed Will to roam the town with his friends on the condition that he check in throughout the day to let her know he was alright. *My God, she wondered, it had only been a few hours, what had happened that required four messages?*

"Let me just check these, and make sure none of them are from Will."

"No problem, I'm not in a hurry."

Beep.

*"Hi Mom, this is me checking in from Mike's. I'm not dead or in mortal danger or anything. I'll let you know if that changes. Bye."*

Beep.

*"Hi Mom. As promised, I'm checking in because we're leaving Mike's house. I'm still alive at the moment, but we're going to Lucas's and it's about a couple hundred feet away, so I guess you never know. Wish me luck."*

Beep.

*"Hi Mom. I'm sure you're surprised, but we made it to Lucas's house unscathed. It was touch and go there for a minute, but we managed."*

Beep.

*"Hi Mom. It's me again. I'm feeling pretty not possessed at the moment, so we've decided to risk biking to the arcade. I'm not gonna call you when I*

*get there because I only have so many quarters and you don't want to know what Keith will expect in exchange for using the office phone, but at least you know where to come looking for me."*

Beep.

With each successive message, Joyce's panic was replaced with irritation. She had very literally been through Hell and back for that boy and she'd do it again in a heartbeat, but it didn't stop her from wanting to wring his neck. Figuratively anyway.

"Don't laugh," she admonished Hopper, pointing a finger at him.

"I'm not laughing." He absolutely was.

"Really? Because it seems like you're laughing."

"Well, maybe a little," he allowed sounding guilty but not at all feeling it.

"This was our deal," Joyce explained, "I let him ride his bike over to Mike's, he was supposed to check in."

"Was mocking you part of the deal? Because I'll be honest, I've never given Will credit for being that much of a smart ass."

"Did you have a reason for coming here? Other than ganging up on me?"

"Two reasons, actually. I talked to Owens. I needed to pick his brain on what to do about getting El evaluated for school and I told him you'd think about getting Will the MRI he wants. He suggested I take El to see some sort of expert over at Purdue and he wants you to know, he could arrange for Will to be seen too."

"So what, is the entire university system all tied up in this now?"

"If you don't want to do it, just tell him no. He's not in a position to tell you to do anything, he's offering."

"What's the other thing?"

"Sorry?"

"You said you had two things, what's the other thing?"

"I'm giving you a heads up, I told Mike the kids could come to the cabin without me. With a few precautions." A lot of precautions. A litany of them.

"Whoa. That doesn't sound like you at all."

"Yeah, I'm still questioning myself on that a bit. Don't tell him I said this, but Mike made a good point. We're getting ready to draw a whole lot of attention to me, so I'm not going to be the most low profile person for a while."

"So now Will's going to want to be taking off with them."

"Yeah, sorry about that, I really don't mean to make things any harder on you. But, if you really want to get down to it, the safest person for Will to be with might actually be El."

Joyce signed in a combination of resignation and frustration. "You know, normal people don't have to have these kinds of conversations."

"We left normal in the rear view mirror a long time ago."

"You told me this would get easier," there was a hint of accusation in her voice even though she knew she couldn't blame him. Short of giving up on Will, there was no way Joyce could have opted out of this insanity, but Hopper voluntarily put himself in the middle of it all for reasons she didn't fully understand.

"I said easier, not easy, Joyce."

She bit her thumbnail and he noticed it was the same mannerism Jonathan had when he was under stress. He could never fix the cause of her distress, so he did the only thing he could do and pulled her into a hug.

Their height difference placed Joyce's head level with Hopper's sternum, the slight dip in his rib cage providing her a welcoming

curve that seemed to be just the right size for her head. She found that particular spot, the spot she had come to think of as hers even though she really had no exclusive right, to be instantly calming and a source of security. For his part, he fell into the routine of pressing an affectionate yet platonic kiss on the crown of her head before bringing his chin to rest there and enveloping her in his arms, holding onto her like she was his anchor. It was a ritual they both sought out more and more over time and it varied little. Until that afternoon when Hopper didn't rest his chin on Joyce's head, but instead left his lips pressed to her hair and inhaled deeply taking in the familiar scent. And Joyce didn't remain pressed into the curve of his chest, but instead tipped her head back to look him in the eye. And they met somewhere in the middle.

## 31. Chapter 31

A/N Sorry for the posting delay, real life gets in the way from time to time. Fun throw back reference for today: Snail mail. Back when it was known simply as mail.

Sunday, June 9, 1985.

*Hey Stalker,*

*I can't keep running up my dad's long distance bill, so I'm writing you instead. Today I went to the beach with my dad. I got totally sunburned and my dad was attacked by a seagull who wanted his hot dog. Those are the hazards of California so it's a nice change of pace from Indiana. I'm sending you some pictures. Give the one of the ocean with nothing else in it and the bag of sand to the Mage. I'm guessing she's never seen the ocean or felt beach sand so I thought maybe she'd think that was cool. Catch me up on all the stuff you can't put in a letter when I get back and tell everyone I say hi.*

*Mad Max*

*P.S. I need a favor. Keep one copy of the tape and put it somewhere for safe keeping. Take all the other copies and mail them to Neil so he thinks I'm waiving the white flag. Don't put a return address on them and I'll pay you for postage when I get back.*

Lucas reread the letter for the dozenth time before returning it to its envelope along with the few pictures and a sandwich bag of light brown sand before taking off for Mike's house. Max still didn't have a return date and yet she remained convinced it would all come together. He couldn't tell if she was genuinely optimistic or just plain stubborn. Probably the latter. The original tape was wiped clean and returned to Eleven with a fresh recording as though nothing had ever happened. One copy was hidden in his top dresser drawer and he had dropped the other two copies in the mail the day before. Lucas hadn't told any other member of the party about the tape or the full circumstances behind Max's sudden departure for California. He'd once told Max that their party had a lot of rules. One of them was you don't lie to your friends, but there was no rule that you had to

volunteer information if no one asked.

Lucas arrived at Mike's house just in time for Will to ride up behind him.

"Will!" Mike called out as he opened the Wheeler's back door that led directly to the basement, "You actually talked your mom into letting up on you!"

"Yeah," Will shrugged as he laid his bike down next to the others before heading inside, "I still have to call to check in everywhere I go, but it's progress at least."

"Don't feel bad," Mike reassured, "If any of our parents knew everything, they'd freak out too."

"Shit. My mom would definitely crack." Dustin laughed, but honestly, the mere thought terrified him.

"I'm pretty sure my parents would make us move," Lucas said, not at all exaggerating.

"Well, its good timing anyway," Mike continued feeling somewhat triumphant about his impending announcement, "because we're going to start going to see El during the week and now you can come."

"How's Hopper going to justify taking that much time off work without it looking suspicious?" Will asked.

"He's not," Mike responded simply.

"You're not going to sneak out there are you?" Will asked nervously.

"Do you have a death wish or something?" Lucas was significantly more blunt.

"We don't have to sneak, Hopper agreed to new rules for summer."

"So you're telling us that now we're allowed to go to the cabin. On our own. Without the Chief being there?" Dustin was dubious.

"As long as we follow the new rules, yeah."

"The same Chief who didn't trust us to even know she was alive?" Dustin continued.

"Are you sure?" Lucas asked.

"It was a long lecture, I'm sure I didn't imagine it," Mike retorted sarcastically.

"Was he sober?" Dustin asked.

"*Dude!*" Lucas and Will simultaneously admonished him.

"What?" Dustin asked defensively, "It's a valid question! Because it's either that or El's learned some new mind control powers."

"I pointed out that us taking off on our own like we do anyway all summer long is a lot less noticeable than him constantly driving us out there and we're running short on time to finish getting El ready for school."

"And he bought that?"

"We're going tomorrow," Mike continued ignoring Dustin entirely. "We have to go somewhere else first, just to make sure we aren't followed, so let's meet up at the junkyard. Say noon? You think your mom will go for that Will? There are phones to check in with—"

"Oh shit!" Will suddenly realized that he hadn't called home since reaching Mike's house, "I still need to let my mom know I'm here!"

"Go ahead and use the phone in the kitchen," Mike suggested, "The only other person home right now is Nancy."

"I'll go with you, I want to see what the snack situation is." Dustin was already following Will up the basement stairs.

"Have you heard from Max recently?" Mike asked turning to Lucas.

"We don't get to talk much because it's long distance, but she's doing ok. It's good for her to see her dad and get away, but her dad doesn't live close enough to her old friends, so she's kinda bored. But, you know, bored is better than being terrorized all the time, right?"



"Yeah, I guess." Mike allowed. "Still. It's messed up."

"No kidding," Lucas deadpanned.

"Hey, Mike!" Dustin called down the stairs.

"What?" Mike shouted back in response.

"Are there any more of those cookies your mom made?"

"It's, like, 10am! Doesn't your mom feed you?"

"Just tell me where they are!"

"Check the pantry, they're in a green container. And bring them with you when you come back," Mike added hoping Dustin would return something something other than just crumbs.

"Max sent a letter," Lucas picked the conversation back up. "She sent El some sand and a picture of the beach."

"She knows not to talk about her in a letter, right?" Mike asked nervously realizing that Hopper's paranoia seemed to be contagious.

"Yeah, she knows," Lucas reassured, "she just called her Mage so even if the letter was intercepted, no one would know who she was talking about. It's going to be weird having El out in the open. Good, but weird."

"I know what you mean. One less secret to keep, right?"

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Susan Hargrove sat down with the carefully selected greeting card from Melvald's stationary section. It was colorful and girlish, but not overwhelmingly pink. The glittery letters on the cover read: *To my daughter on her 14th birthday*. Susan sat with her pen poised above the card and froze, unsure what to say or when her own daughter had become such a stranger to her. She reached into her purse and pulled out a folded up piece of paper from its hiding place, the tattered edge

of the spiral notebook creating a fringe on one side. She unfolded it and reread it again, even though she had it all but memorized by now.

*Mom,*

*I don't know what Neil is going to tell you, so I'm writing you a letter to make sure you get my side of the story. No matter what he tells you, the truth is that I wanted to visit Dad this summer because I miss him and I need a break, but I still want to live with you. I don't understand why you stay with Neil when he's mean to both me and you, but I'm also not going to make you choose between us. Please don't make me choose between you and Dad because that's not fair. I know you might not be able to call me while I'm gone and that's ok. I just really hope Neil is lying and you're not actually mad at me for wanting to see Dad. If he doesn't let me come back at the end of the summer, please at least talk to me sometimes so I know you don't hate me. I love you.*

*Max*

If only Max understood things just weren't as simple as she thought they were. If only she could just keep the peace and they could all go back to getting along. She remembered helping Max fix her hair for the middle school winter dance and how pretty she looked. That's what Susan envisioned when she thought about what it would be like to raise a daughter, not this mess.

She dated the card: *June 9, 1985*. She would mail it the next day and it would reach California just in time. Her baby girl was turning fourteen on the fourteenth. Her golden birthday that only happens once in a lifetime and Susan would miss it. Insult to injury.

*Dear Maxine,*

*I hate being away from you on your birthday, but I hope you're having fun in California with your dad. This will be the first year I haven't woken you up on your birthday to tell you the story of the day you were born, so just in case you somehow forgot, here it is: It was raining cats and dogs and your dad was at work when I went into labor. I left a message for your dad to come to the hospital and I called myself a cab. You were in such a hurry to be born, I barely made it to the hospital in time and your dad*

*didn't get there for almost two hours. While we waited for him, it was just us. We sat in my hospital room and I couldn't stop staring at you. I was sure that you were the prettiest baby ever born.*

*I found the letter you left me. No, I'm not mad at you and I could never hate you. I love you and I will always love you. I wish you would talk to me like you used to, maybe that would clear up a lot of our misunderstandings before they got this far out of control. I know that Neil is more strict than you're used to and that must feel like he's being mean to you. He's been under a lot of stress and you've been really moody since we left California, so I think there's a plenty of blame to go around. Neil told me about your argument and I want you to come home, but you need to accept the house rules. It's not fair to expect him to live with the threat of being arrested every time you want to avoid getting in trouble.*

*Take this time with your dad to think about things. If you decide you want to come back and try having a fresh start, you can always come home. I know Neil just wants a peaceful family where everyone gets along.*

*Love,*

*Mom*

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"So are we doing this now?" Joyce asked, completely unsure what to think about anything anymore.

"I don't know, honestly, I'm not exactly working with a plan here. Would it be a bad thing?" Hopper asked the question before he thought about it but as soon as it was out there, he dreaded her response.

"No, of course not," she replied quickly, "I just..." Joyce trailed off, not completing the thought.

"Whatever it is, Joyce, just say it." He just needed everything out on the table. He needed to know.

"I can't lose this friendship. I know I can't get through the rest of my

life without it. Not after everything that's happened."

Well. That was unexpected. "What makes you think I'm going anywhere?"

"The fact that the last time we screwed things up, we went twenty years without talking to each other," she responded aloud and then silently in her own mind, *the fact that I managed to get Bob killed after only a few months*. She was a curse and she knew it. She wouldn't take him down with her. "I'm not blaming you. If anything, I'm a terrible person for not reaching out to you when you got back in town. You'd just lost Sara."

"And you were dealing with Lonnie. You're not a terrible person, Joyce. Or at least, if you are, you're no worse than me. There were rumors going around about you and Lonnie that I didn't look into when I should have. It was easier to just think of them as rumors. And then you filed for divorce and I figured it didn't matter anymore at that point."

"He never hit me, just so you know. I know that was going around, so if you're feeling guilty about that, don't. He threatened, but he never did."

"He probably thought there was a decent chance of you laying him out," he quipped, falling back on the comfortable defense of irreverent humor. "All the same, I ignored it."

"But you were the first person who believed me about Will." He would never realize how much that meant to her. To be believed when even Jonathan thought she was going crazy. When even she believed she was going crazy.

"Yeah, I guess," he allowed, not wanting to make a big deal of it. "Eventually."

"Why did you?"

"Why did I what?"

"Keep looking?" Joyce persisted.

"Well. It's kind of my job."

"Once there was a body, you would have been perfectly justified in calling it a day," she pointed out.

"If you recall, you made yourself pretty hard to ignore." Again he tried avoiding the real question.

"*Seriously*, Hop."

Seeing that she wasn't going to let him off the hook without answering, he paused by then finally responded, "Remember what I said to you when we left the Ives' house? I would haven given anything for a chance. Well, you had a chance." And it was just as simple as that. Joyce had what Hopper couldn't. And whatever else had happened between them years ago, he couldn't deny her that chance.

They were interrupted by the sound of tires coming to a stop on the gravel driveway.

"That's Jonathan," Joyce said absently.

"Yeah," Hopper responded, not making any move to leave.

"Tell Dr Owens we'll bring Will along when you take El to Purdue. Just to be sure everything's back to normal. And we'll figure this out." He wondered if she was purposefully ambiguous about what *this* they would be figuring out.

But all he said was, "Ok, sure."

"Mom?" Jonathan called as he walked into this house, "Is anything wrong?"

"No, sweetie," she replied as though nothing whatsoever was out of the ordinary. "Hopper was just giving me an update from Dr Owens."

"Still not using the phones, huh?" Jonathan asked teasingly.

"Not for this," Hopper replied flatly. Phones were still not to be trusted.

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After sending Eleven to bed for the night, Hopper stayed up thinking, ignoring the Tonight Show on in the background. He couldn't argue with Joyce...well, actually, he could and that was precisely the problem. They fought like hell as teenagers and he could tell himself that they were adults now and that they'd grown past all that sort of nonsense, but truth be told, had Will not gone missing, they probably still wouldn't have said two words to each other despite their status as grown ass adults. Once he knew she worked there, he'd avoided Melvald's like the plague when he returned to Hawkins. She was the only other adult in his life he could really talk to without having to carefully filter and conceal the truth and she was in the same boat. The mere idea of not having someone else with that shared experience caused such a crushing loneliness that he wasn't sure how he'd cope if the worst case scenario actual came to be.

Hopper cracked open El's bedroom door to see that she was, in fact, asleep before pushing the sofa back to reveal the access door to the basement crawl space. He crouched down, ignoring the protestations of his aging knees and found the box labeled "Vietnam." He flipped open the lid, found the envelope he was looking for and shoved everything back in place.

*This*, he reminded himself, *this is what happens when Joyce and I screw things up*. The last communication before November 7, 1983 when she'd stormed his office demanding to be heard. The letter he never answered. The reason he went to New York instead of coming back to Hawkins. The start of the black hole.

*August 10, 1966*

*Hop,*

*I don't know how long this will take to get to you or if it will get to you or where you are. Your mom gave me this address but she says you usually don't write back because you can't. It had better be because you can't because if you're ignoring your mom I will track you down in whatever jungle you're in and personally kick your ass. It seems like I've started this*

*letter a hundred times and I should probably just get something off to you since we don't know what's going to happen. Shit. I probably shouldn't say that. Sorry. I'm sure everything will turn out ok it's just that the news is getting scary and I worry about you.*

*Your mom said you're not planning to reenlist so you'll be out of the Army soon. I wish I could say all of this in person, but you left right after graduation and now I'm hearing you're not coming back to Hawkins at all so I guess a letter will just have to do. I'm not even sure I remember what we argued about, but I'm sure it was stupid. I'm sorry we didn't patch things up before you left and I'd like to think we can stay friends even if you only ever come home to visit. We can get a beer legally for once, right? I also need to tell you that I'm pregnant. It's Lonnie's and we're getting married. I hate to put that in a letter but I didn't want you to hear it from someone else and I don't know when I'm going to see you next.*

*Write me back if you can. Stay safe. Come visit.*

*I miss you.*

*Joyce*

## 32. Chapter 32

A/N Thanks again to everyone for giving feedback. It's a lot more fun when this sort of thing is a bit interactive. Also, just because I find the traffic graphs on this site so interesting, there are exactly two people in all of Denmark (which is where my paternal grandfather immigrated from. Illegally even.) who read this story. Probably not information that's amusing to anyone but me, but hello to you both.

Hopper returned to the cabin Sunday afternoon to find Eleven intently reviewing a building diagram and small stack of pictures.

"What you got there, kid?" he asked, looking over her shoulder.

"Mike brought me a map of the school and pictures. I'm memorizing where everything is."

There was a time when he wouldn't have understood why that was important to her, but now he got it. There was little she could do to feel genuinely prepared for an experience for which she had no frame of reference, so she was focusing on something she could easily master in order to have some semblance of control. He could sympathize. "Not a bad idea. One less thing to think about on your first day."

"Speaking of school, I think I have a solution to our testing problem," he continued keeping his demeanor nonchalant in the hopes she would just go with it. He also avoided looking directly at her to see whether or not she was glaring at him. She was. "There's a college about an hour from here with a professor who does this sort of thing. She's willing to sit down and work with you instead of using the regular tests. Plus," he added, knowing it was his best chance to convince her, "it's where your mom went, so if nothing else, I at least figured that maybe you might like to see it."

"Mama went to school there?" her interest was successfully piqued and Hopper let out the breath he didn't realize he was holding.

"According to your Aunt Becky, yeah."



Eleven considered the idea before asking, "Can Mike come?"

"Yeah, sure. If he wants to," *of course he would want to*, but Hopper refrained from rolling his eyes, "but we're also bringing Joyce and Will because Dr. Owens would like for Will to get one more test just to be safe."

"Will Dr. Owens be there?" She asked darkly. And with that whatever good will the promise of seeing Terry's alma mater had won him was gone.

"To see Will, yes. And I know how you feel about him," Hopper continued without any sort of pause Eleven might capitalize on, "but we still need him from time to time so you're going to have to deal with it. He's also the person who knows this professor who is saving us the trouble of figuring out a way around these tests."

She stared at him, hard, but all she got in response were raised eyebrows in a silent exchange that roughly translated to: *I know you're not happy about it, but we're out of options.*

"Fine" she finally allowed, "but *only* because I want to see Mama's school."

He was ready to declare that a victory.

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After the summer rules were announced, Mike and Eleven had worked out an additional code to let her know when she could expect a visit. All they had to work with was the now familiar and comforting Marco, Polo exchange, so they agreed that Mike would signal twice in a row if he was bringing the other kids over. That took care of the day of the visit, but not the time and Eleven immediately realized the flaw in their plan a few minutes after the second Marco Polo exchange: she was a terribly impatient person, particularly when it came to Mike.

She washed her breakfast dishes. She made her bed. She read her book. She looked out the window at least a dozen times in hopeful

anticipation (even though she still wasn't technically supposed to open the curtains). She flipped through all the channels multiple times without finding anything appealing. She took out the photo album Aunt Becky had made her and studied the now very familiar pictures of Mama as a young girl. She was on the verge of going snooping through the boxes in the crawl space (despite having been told to stay out of there and leave them alone) when she heard the knock: twice, once, three times. She opened the door so fast, she nearly took it off its hinges and practically took Mike off his feet with the force of her hug.

Despite having had regular visits for the past seven months, there was something both refreshingly novel and yet reminiscent about hanging out with the entire party in the middle of the day without any adults around.

"We brought games," Will announced, walking into the cabin.

"And some movies," Mike added, "although we can probably leave those with you since we only have a couple hours."

"And snacks!" Dustin told her brightly, hefting his backpack onto the table.

"Because God forbid you go anywhere without snacks," Lucas teased him.

"Hey. If we have to go all the way to the junk yard just to come all the way out here and do the same thing on the way back, we're gonna need sustenance."

"What kinds of snacks?" El asked as she peered into the bag. It wasn't as though Hopper was on any sort of a health kick, but based on his contributions to their get togethers, Eleven imagined Dustin's pantry must look like Willy Wonka did his grocery shopping.

"See?" Dustin told Lucas triumphantly, "El gets it."

"El still has twelve years of junk food deprivation to make up for," Lucas shot back, "you have no excuse."

"How's your morning been?" Mike asked Eleven turning away from

the banter of the rest of the party.

"Waiting makes it extra boring," she told him. "We need a code for time."

"Oh, right. That would probably be helpful. Sorry, I should have thought about that. How about before we leave each time, we just make a plan for the next time and then you know?"

She nodded, "Yes, that's good."

"We also brought you new tapes," he fished them out of his backpack and named them off for her, "You've got some history, some social studies, and some science. And Nancy made you a tape, but she didn't tell me what's on it. No idea what that's about."

Eleven turned the tape from Nancy back and forth as though she could tell something about the content just by looking at the plastic casing. In Eleven's mind, Nancy was the living embodiment of pretty and for that reason, Nancy fascinated El.

"Oh, and Max sent you this," Lucas handed her the photograph and small plastic bag of sand. "It's a picture of the beach and beach sand," he explained when she gave him a quizzical look. Eleven studied the picture intently.

"It's so big," she finally commented.

"The ocean?" Lucas clarified and she nodded. "Yeah, it's kind of overwhelming in person. We went to Florida a couple years ago and the beach is fine but the idea of actually swimming out in the ocean kind of freaked me out."

"Oh hell no," Dustin interjected. "I don't swim in anything that contains wildlife. Give me a pool any day."

"What's a pool?"

"You put a big hole in the ground, line it with cement and fill it with water," Dustin explained. "Like a man made pond that definitely doesn't have any sharks in it."

"Like the bath," Eleven half whispered and Mike immediately picked up on the reference.

"No, El, not like that," he reassured her, "It's outside and the top is open and it's bright. You don't sit on the bottom of it. It's fun. And it's really nice in summer when it's hot outside."

"We should teach El how to swim!" Dustin decided.

"Um, where are we going to do that?" Lucas asked sarcastically gesturing around the cabin. "The tub?"

"Yeah," Will added, "maybe next summer, but there's no way Hopper's gonna bend the rules that much this summer."

"Not the community pool," Dustin clarified like his intent should have been obvious. "Steve had a pool. It's totally private."

The only time any of the others had seen Steve's pool was in the grainy picture of Barb Holland dangling her feet over the edge. It hadn't occurred to any of them to actually want to try swimming in the thing.

"Do you want to learn to swim," Mike asked gently knowing that water tanks held ugly and terrifying memories for Eleven.

"Maybe," she said slowly.

"Ok, well, you think about it. If you want to, we'll figure out how to convince Hopper." Mike squeezed her hand and sensing she needed a change in conversation, "Do you want to play a game? I brought Clue?"

"Aren't they making that into a movie?" Will asked.

"How do you make a board game into a movie?" Lucas asked doubtfully.

"I don't know, I just heard it's coming out at Christmas. Jonathan told me," Will added because bringing Jonathan into it gave him the extra boost of authority.

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"What's with the paper birds?" Hopper asked her that evening when he returned to the cabin.

"They're cranes. Will taught me today."

"I figured the boys would come by first chance they got. Everyone behave themselves?" It was practically a rhetorical question given that he didn't really think anyone would step out of bounds or he wouldn't have agreed to these visits to begin with. And even if they did, he didn't for a moment believe Eleven would rat them out. Kid was nothing if not loyal.

Rather than answer, she just raised an eyebrow at him and stared for a moment to make her point before mentally lifting a paper bird into the air and demonstrating how it floated delicately over the table.

"Are they supposed to fly?" he teased.

"Well, they're birds so....," she responded, matching his tone.

Hopper grinned at her and then he finally noticed the rest of the cabin. "Holy shit, kid, how many of these things did you make?" The battered coffee table was covered and small paper birds had begun to spill onto the floor.

"I got bored after the boys left," she offered by way of explanation.

"I can see that."

"If you make one thousand, you get a wish," she told him very seriously.

Hopper grunted. "Did Will tell you that too?"

"From a story. But in the book, she's too sick to finish so she doesn't get her wish to get better. She's gone."

"Jesus, what the hell kind of book is that for a kid?"

"It was on the list for middle school."

"Don't fold a thousand of those things," he told her envisioning what the finished project would look like if the current state of the cabin was only representative of an afternoon's work, "we won't have anywhere to put them. How about you just fold a hundred and make a smaller wish."

"That's not how it works," she explained patiently in a way that let him know she was humoring him. "It takes a thousand."

"Yeah, well it only takes one dandelion, wish on those. What are you wishing for anyway?"

"You can't tell wishes," she told him disdainfully, "everyone knows that."

The same kid who had to be taught mundane things like how to use a broom and what a hairbrush was suddenly knew all the ins and outs of things like rules for wishes and he wondered how that crept up on him.

"You up for more company today or are you going to be too busy folding paper?" Hopper smiled as Eleven's eyebrows shot up to the middle of her forehead. No matter how fluently she learned to speak, he hoped she never lost her exaggerated facial expressions. "Go put on your shoes, Joyce asked us over to dinner."

Eleven did not need to be told twice.

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After dinner, Hopper and Mrs Byers sat on the front porch smoking and discussing things Eleven and Will assumed they didn't want overheard.

"Ok?" Eleven asked Will as they sat next to each other on the sofa, paying minimal attention to summer re-runs of sitcoms that weren't all that great the first time around.

"Yeah, I guess," he shrugged his narrow shoulders but didn't turn to make eye contact with her, "Just a little nervous."

"Your test?" Eleven had wanted to ask Will about it since Hopper told her on the previous night, but they hadn't had a minute alone.

"Yeah." Will admitted softly.

"Does it hurt?"

"No, you just lay inside this tunnel kind of thing and stay still for an hour. It's actually pretty boring."

"So why are you nervous?"

Will gave that question some serious thought before answering. "Because I'm afraid it will show something is still in me. I know, logically, if it's in there, it's in there and not knowing doesn't make it any better. But still... "

"Do you still feel him?," Eleven lowered her voice in the event this was something Will was keeping secret. "The Mind Flayer?"

"No," Will quickly corrected her, "but when it started, I didn't feel him either. It was just like having strange memories. I still remember things, but I don't know if they're new thoughts or not."

"Is it better to know?" She asked, more for herself than for him, but Will wouldn't know that.

"If the test comes out clean, then I'll definitely say yes. If not, and none of this is really over...well, I shouldn't feel better not knowing, but I kinda do. I guess that doesn't make any sense."

"Makes sense to me." Eleven told him sincerely. Will looked at her expectantly because the way Eleven had said it made that sound like a very loaded statement.

"Papa might be alive." She admitted, "I could find him if I looked. But I haven't looked."

"Because you're afraid of what you might find?"

"Yes," she whispered and Will put his arm around her in a side hug.

"I'm sorry," she told him softly, staring into her lap.

"What are you sorry for?"

"I opened the gate," she said simply, eyes still downcast.

"El," Will didn't realize how much he sounded like his mother in that moment, "we've talked about this already. You didn't do it on purpose, it's not your fault."

"But I could have gone back instead of hiding," she argued, "I could have closed it before the Mind Flayer came."

"They would have put you back in the lab."

"But you would have been safe."

"But you wouldn't have."

The sound of patio furniture scraping the wooden porch halted their conversation as they both turned to see Hopper and Mrs Byers come in through the front door.

"Ok, kid," Hopper told her, "we should get going."

She pulled herself up into the Blazer after saying her goodbyes and the pair of them drove in silence, each lost in thought. Hopper parked and waited for her to catch up to him before walking the rest of the way to the cabin. She slipped her hand into his, something she generally did only when she was in need of reassurance.

"You ok there, kid?" He asked gently.

"Would you rather know bad news or not know good news?" She asked in response.

Ah, he thought, Will's MRI. Of course they had been talking about that.

He thought on it a bit and rather than answer the question directly,



he told her, "When Sara was sick, her mom and me would have to meet with her doctor all the time to find out if her treatments were working. At first, we were so desperate for information, I'd get angry if the doctor was even a minute late because I couldn't wait to know something. Anything. Towards the end there, I knew they weren't working and I knew the news would be bad. I remember sitting in that office wishing I could stop time so I'd never have to hear him say we were out of options. It wouldn't have changed anything, but I just didn't want to hear him say it. So yeah, kid, I understand not wanting to know, but ignorance isn't really bliss. It's just ignorance."

She nodded to herself. It was time to know. One way or the other.

### 33. Chapter 33

**A/N Late June 1985. I have the last few chapters more or less mapped out and pieces of them written. I feel like this project had been the very definition of a slow burn (which has made it an effective time killer for me anyway), so thanks for coming along for the ride with me.**

Eleven had managed to figure out how to make a handful of paper cranes fly at the same time, but she couldn't divide her attention between a larger number well enough to get and keep them in the air. She tried, but rather than flying, they just sort of pulsed as though they were breathing.

"Oh Jesus!" Hopper turned away from the stove where he was making a valiant effort at a dinner that didn't come pre-wrapped in foil and damned near had a heart attack from the swarm of paper cranes that had accumulated while his back was turned. "What the hell, kid?"

"I'm trying to make them all fly." Her tone was pure innocence, but she couldn't mask her amusement. He regretted ever telling her scaring someone could be a fun sort of prank, she took far too much pleasure in turning his hair gray.

"Yeah, well what you're accomplishing is more like Alfred Hitchcock."

She hummed the first few notes of the Funeral March if the Marionette and looked to Hopper for confirmation.

"That's the guy, but not the TV show. A movie. I'll find you a copy then you'll understand. In the meantime, if you want to keep these things, they have to stay in your room and out of the way."

"Fine," she grumbled.

(When they watched the movie a few weeks later and she was not impressed. "They're just *birds*," she told him and he muttered something about kids these days and not having proper appreciation for the classics.)

"How many more of these are you planning on making anyway?"

"Told you," she replied with a hint of exasperation, "I need a thousand."

"How about you just tell me what you plan on wishing for and I'll get it for you and you can stop making these damned things?"

She paused and considered this option. "Do you promise? If I tell you?"

"Well when you put it that way, it sounds like this is something you think I wouldn't agree to if I knew."

She didn't say anything, but went right back to folding.

"Oh for the love of..." he muttered under his breath, attempting to guesstimate just how much longer he was going to have to put up with this. "Alright fine, don't tell me. Just get those things put away and come sit down. Your dinner's ready."

"Tomorrow's a big day, you ready?" He asked as she took her seat.

"We can stay with Will, right?"

"If you want to. Will's test is first thing in the morning, the professor you're meeting with wasn't available until a few hours later. I thought we'd take a walk around the campus to kill the time, but we can all stay together if you want. You do realize that means you'd have to actually see Doc Owens, right?" He added, not so much to dissuade her but to avoid any surprise encounters which might go poorly.

"Will is a friend," she replied. For Eleven, it was just that simple: friends are people you'd do anything for. The first lessons she'd learned after leaving the lab were ingrained in her the most deeply.

"Well, I'm sure Will will appreciate you and Mike being there."

"And you," Eleven corrected.

"And *me*?"

"You went to the lab with him. Every time," she explained, somewhat surprised he didn't already know this.

"I was up to my neck in all of this bullshit," he told her dismissively. "Always will be, I guess. Anyway, it seemed like the thing to do to see it through."

"He liked you there."

Not knowing what else to say to that, Hopper simply said, "We take care of our friends, yeah?"

"Yes."

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As predicted, Mike most definitely did want to accompany Eleven for her second attempt at school testing. Hopper planned to get to the Byers' right after breakfast and drive all five of them to the main Purdue campus in Lafayette. Thanks to the medical school, there was equipment Owens no longer had access to after the lab closed. Mike stayed the night to make the morning go more smoothly and as soon as Eleven arrived, she grabbed both boys by their wrists and pulled them towards Will's bedroom.

"I have a plan," she told them breathlessly as soon as she had closed the door.

"A plan for what?" Mike asked.

"Remember how I went to see Kali?" Eleven began.

"Who's Kali?" Will interrupted.

"Another kid they did experiments on at the lab. El ran away and went to Chicago to find her." Mike explained quickly.

"Wait, what?" This was the first Will heard of this. "When did that happen?"

"The night we rescued Hopper from the tunnels." Mike responded.

"Why did Hopper need to be rescued?" Now it was Eleven's turn to be surprised.

"Hopper figured out all those drawings Will did had something to do with the fields of rotting pumpkins, so he went digging. Literally. The vines in the tunnels almost got him."

"He went by *himself*? He'd be so mad if I did that!"

"Get used to adult hypocrisy, El." Will told her unsympathetically.

"So much for not being stupid." Eleven muttered, still angry Hopper had readily taken such a stupid risk not twenty-four hours after he'd completely blown up at her for taking a relatively minor one.

"El, focus!" Mike waived his hand in front of her to catch her attention. "Let's get back to this plan of yours."

"Kali was looking for the Bad Men so she could hurt them. I helped her find the man who hurt Mama. He said he knew where to find Papa."

"Is *that* why you're worried he might be alive?" Will asked.

"You never told me you thought Brenner might actually be alive!" Mike was realizing that at some point they really needed to tell each other everything about that week last November because they were clearly all missing pieces.

"I haven't looked because I was afraid to find him," Eleven explained. "But now I'm going to look. In the Void. Tonight."

"Why don't you wait until we all come out to the cabin, then we can be with you?" Mike didn't think he could protect her from the thoughts in her head, but it didn't keep him from worrying.

"No." Eleven shook her head, "If I find him, better if he's sleeping."

"Why does it matter if he's sleeping?" Mike asked.

"Are you worried he might be one of the people who can see you in the Void?" Will asked softly.

"There are people who can see you in the Void?" Mike was really starting to wonder how much Eleven hadn't told him.

"Will, Mama, Kali and the Demogorgon." Eleven explained patiently.

"C'mon kids, we need to get going!" Mrs. Byers called from the other room.

"El, are you *sure* about this?" Mike wanted so badly for Eleven's past to stay dead. For her sake.

"It's better to know." Eleven assured him.

"El! Will! Mike! Let's go!" Hopper yelled impatiently.

"Does Hopper know?" Mike whispered as they walked down the hall.

"I'll tell him," Eleven promised before adding "After."

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The drive to the university hospital was uneventful and, because they couldn't continue their conversation with Hopper and Mrs Byers sitting right there, rather boring. Meanwhile Hopper and Mrs Byers seemed completely oblivious to the three kids in the back seat. Eleven watched them share everything from cigarettes to quiet, breathy laughs over things Eleven didn't understand and her fingers itched for paper to fold. She settled for wrapping her arm around Mike's and leaning on his shoulder.

They pulled up to the university hospital early enough that the visitor's parking lot was mostly empty. "Are you sure you want to go in?" Hopper asked her when he caught her staring at the monolithic building that bore a vague resemblance to the Hawkins National Lab.

She reached for and squeezed Will's hand before she told him simply, "Sure." and walked toward the building fortified by false bravado.

They checked in and were ushered into a bland yet private waiting area with dated magazines and the sort of artwork only found in waiting rooms. They didn't have to wait long before the door swung open and Owens walked into the room without a cane now, but still with a noticeable limp.

"Will!" Dr Owens greeted him affably, though it was impossible to really tell whether it was an expression of genuine fondness or simply the facade that he put on for pretty much everyone. Owens noted Hopper and Joyce, who he expected, but he had not expected the smaller, honorary Hopper to join them. "And I see you've brought the whole family."

The last and only other time Dr Owens had seen Eleven, she was pre-occupied with greater threats than him, so at most she had regarded him with hesitant curiosity. This time, she came as Will's self appointed guardian and she stared Owens down with such any icy fierceness that he found it difficult to maintain eye contact. Hopper found it far more amusing than he probably should have, but seeing Eleven become this menacing creature who very literally personified the saying "if looks could kill" when only just last night she requested he read her a bedtime story to help her sleep was just too much.

Owens clapped his hands and rubbed them together to distract from his own discomfort. "Shall we get started so we can get you out of here?"

Owens walked through a series of swinging doors, Eleven noted the way back in the event they needed it along with the lack of security guards and keyed entrances. Flashback after flashback hit her as she walked through what was tantamount to a gauntlet of triggers (tiled walls, orderlies in white uniforms, a maze of hallways with florescent lighting, even the antiseptic smell that permeated the building threatened to unleash the carefully packed away memories of her own personal hell), but she pushed the memories and the panicky feelings aside and focused on the task at hand: making sure Will stayed safe. The only time she let him out of her sight was when he changed into a hospital gown.

They had been offered coffee and water and a more comfortable waiting room by a very well meaning and nameless young woman

dressed in scrubs, but even if she'd managed to convince Eleven, Mrs Byers had no intentions of going anywhere. Instead they were shown to an adjacent viewing room where Dr Owens and a radiologist had installed themselves behind a monitor and a set of controls.

The procedure itself was much like Will had described it to Eleven: a long slab for laying on that retracted until his body was ensconced in a large, white tunnel that rotated around his body. He simply laid there for the better part of an hour before Dr Owens pronounced him done for the day.

"How long before we have results?" Mrs Byers asked nervously.

"I want to take a few days to compare today's scans to previous ones," Owens told her, "but what we've seen initially looks promising."

"Promising how?" she pressed.

"Well, we expect some trauma in the hippocampus because that's consistent with patients with PTSD. Where we had trouble before was when we started seeing activity in the limbic and paralimbic regions of the brain which, again, I want to do a detailed comparison, but don't appear to be affected at this time."

"So...English?" Hopper asked knowing that the technical jargon was only going to drive Joyce's anxiety levels through the roof.

"Initial results look clean, but I want to do a closer comparison to older scans."

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With one kid down and one to go, they drove across campus (the confusing tangle of streets you were and were not allowed to drive on elicited more than a few words from Hopper that would not have been tolerated coming from the backseat) until they arrived at yet another bland, cement building labeled "Education Department Administration" in black metal letters attached to the building. Hopper consulted a wall mounted directory as they entered the seemingly vacant building and they followed the twisting hallways



until they arrived at an office bearing the name plate "Prof Miller."

"Wait here," he said in an absent way that was directed at either all of them or none of them in particular before knocking on the door that was slightly ajar.

Hopper wasn't quite sure what he expected, but Helen Miller wasn't it. She looked barely older than Nancy Wheeler leading Hopper to silently wonder whether she was some sort of child prodigy or if there was a portrait of her aging in her attic.

"Don't worry," she started the conversation, "I've been briefed."

"Briefed how?"

"There's a history that I'm not going to be privy to, so I shouldn't bother asking. Also, I should forget all of the ordinary testing that we'd do in this sort of situation because apparently that's a trigger so we're going to have to work around that too. Normally, I'd say that's a doomed endeavor, but given the source of your referral here, I'm going to go out on a limb and assume that paperwork saying whatever we need it to say can just be arranged. So what this all really boils down to is we just need to figure out what's going to work for her and then reverse engineer whatever test results we need to support that."

Clearly she had been briefed.

"That seems to sum it up nicely. And she doesn't have to be by herself?"

"You can be there the whole time, just don't interfere."

"Nothing with an institutional feel to it, right?" This comment was completely unnecessary given that the woman's office looked like a used bookstore run by hoarders.

"Like I said, I've been briefed," she assured, gesturing for Hopper to come further into the office so she could invite the rest of the group in.

In the same breath in which she'd introduced herself to Eleven, Helen

Miller announced that she was not a fan of working indoors whenever she could avoid it and invited El to meet her rescue dog whom she'd found starving and abandoned in an apartment the year prior. Eleven barely gave Hopper a backwards glance before following the young professor.

"Oh, she's good," Joyce said just above a whisper.

"Yeah, just give her some candy and a windowless van and she could have herself a proper human trafficking ring."

"Oh good grief, Hop," Joyce smacked his shoulder with the back of her hand, "You can't turn it off for one second, can you?"

They followed Eleven to one of a handful of picnic tables shaded by a cluster of trees. It was the sort of place that, in a few short months would be filled with caffeine enhanced college students trying to complete last minute assignments, but in late June, it was abandoned. Having been through this drill before, Mike made sure he brought a book with him (Dune, because Dustin assured him the movie would make much more sense after he'd read the book. Three quarters of the way through the book, Mike still wasn't seeing it) and Will just leaned into his mother, finally able to relax after clearly having his share of sleepless nights.

Hopper watched Eleven and tried to follow what was going on despite maintaining a respectable distance. Within thirty minutes, El had moved from speaking in single word sentences to talking as much as he'd ever seen her. Granted, she was talking to the dog, but she was talking nonetheless. In front of a stranger, even.

"You know she's gonna want you to get her a dog now, right?" Hopper hadn't realized that Mike was no longer buried in his book.

"Shut up, Mike," he shot back, but there was no heat in his response.

Mike was slowly becoming immune to Hopper's grouchy demeanor and just smiled as he returned to his book.

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Right about the time it was getting warm enough to make everyone want to find some lunch and some air conditioning, Eleven returned to the group with Helen Miller trailing close behind.

"Ok, well, not a whole lot of surprises here, I think. Math is a little behind, but you've got the rest of the summer to come up to speed." Hopper notes how she very intentionally addressed her comments to Eleven directly. She was good. "Language and reading need some more work. Good news is that I'm not seeing a problem with the mechanics of reading or comprehension, it's more of a fluency issue. I'm going to send you home with some materials to build your vocabulary, but you also need to speak as much as possible. Are you mostly alone during the day?"

"Yes," El responded hesitantly, uncomfortable with giving up any details about her days in the cabin.

"That needs to change. Is that possible?"

"Yes, that's totally possible," Mike answered for her.

"We'll *talk* about it," Hopper amended giving Mike a reproachful stare.

"I'm thinking that when the school year comes, you should have access to tutoring, additional time to complete tests and I'd like you to have access to the materials before you go over them in class so you can take all the time you need to read through them and understand them in advance without the stress of the classroom."

"That's it?" Eleven asked, expecting something a lot of complicated. Everything in her life seemed to require such complex arrangements.

"That's it. You're going to have to put in more work than your classmates, but if you're willing to do that, I don't see any reason why you can't do just fine."

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They walked across the campus stopping at a sandwich shop in the

student union. It was cool and comfortable and practically a ghost town. Eleven drank in her surroundings, trying to picture her Mama seated at these very tables eating a meal or sipping a drink between classes.

On every available surface there were fliers with fringed tabs at the bottom meant to be torn off and taken with you. Guitar lessons, Spanish tutors, study abroad opportunities, apartments for rent, join the Peace Corps, register voters. Eleven knew that Mama became involved with the Lab while she was in college, but it was all so removed from reality that In College felt like a mythical place that only existed in one's imagination like War Drobe and Spare Oom. Walking where Mama had actually walked before she'd ever gotten mixed up with Papa gave her an odd sense of impending doom. Had Mama pulled a tab off the bottom of a flier like the ones Eleven was seeing? Just what did Mama think she was getting herself into?

"Hopper?"

"Yeah kid?"

"Seen enough."

"You sure?"

"Sure."

"Ok then."

## 34. Chapter 34

"Hopper?" Eleven's urgent whisper broke the white noise of the seemingly ever present chirrup of the cicadas. "*Hop?*"

"What is it, kid?" Though it had decreased in frequency over time, Hopper still found himself on the receiving end of the occasional middle of the night check in for everything from unfamiliar noises to insomnia. He didn't bother opening his eyes; the covered windows ensured the cabin was practically pitch dark so it wouldn't have done any good anyway and if he kept them closed, he assumed he could fall back to sleep more quickly.

"Don't be mad."

Evidently, this midnight check in could be attributed to a guilty conscience. *The shit he puts up with.*

"It's...", he took the time to allow his eyes to focus on the red digital numbers of his alarm clock, "almost 3am. Whatever you did, just spit it out."

"Amnesty?" she asked and in his fog he'd forgotten ever teaching her that word, though he was tired enough he was unlikely to care about anything short of actual murder. And possibly not even then.

"If it gets me back to sleep quicker, sure. Now what is it?"

"I was in the Void."

He was waiting for the day when she'd get more than she bargained for doing that. He thought that perhaps today was the day she learned that there are some things you can't unsee so you shouldn't go looking in the first place. "Yeah?"

"I found him."

"Him who?"

"Papa."

And just like that, everything they'd worked for, every sacrifice they'd made, everything they'd done to make her safe, everything that made a normal life seem possible for both of them, everything threatened to unravel.

"Oh, El," he swung his legs around so that he was sitting on the edge of his too narrow for him bed and patted the spot next to him as an invitation, a full night's sleep no longer a consideration. She settled in, pulling her knees to her chest and he wrapped his arm around her and rested his chin on the top of her head. "Of course I'm not mad, kid."

Along with all the rest of her powers, Eleven's ability to reach the Void had grown stronger as she aged. Earlier that night, she'd laid in bed, pretending to sleep while she waited for Hopper to finish watching the evening news, turn the television off and fall asleep. She'd waited longer still, looking out her bedroom window at the patches of stars visible through the tree branches. She'd very nearly reconsidered her plan, but Hopper's words repeated themselves in her mind: ignorance isn't bliss, it's just ignorance.

"You said," her voice wavered and it was obvious she was struggling to keep herself together, "better to know."

"Is that what that was about the other night? When you asked me if it was better to know good news or not know bad news?"

"Didn't want Kali to be right. Had to know," she buried her face into his chest and her tears began to soak through his t-shirt.

"Hey," he called to her softly, trying to get her attention while stroking the back of her hair, "It's gonna be ok, kid. We'll figure this one out like we always do. What did you see exactly?"

"Papa...at a...window...watching." Her breath hitched every few syllables.

"Like a window looking outside?"

She shook her head. "Into...a room."

The image haunted her. She'd hoped to not find him at all, but at

most to find him sleeping. Instead she'd found him as she'd seen him so many times: jacket removed, white oxford shirt with the cuffs rolled up to the middle of his forearms, narrow black tie loosened, staring intently at something she couldn't see the way he used to stare at her.

"Like one of the rooms at the lab?"

She nodded miserably.

"Where is he, kid?"

"Not here. Didn't stay long enough to tell."

They sat in quiet darkness absorbing the implications of what El found. Brenner was out there somewhere, not close perhaps, but somewhere. And he was working.

"I have to stay hidden." Eleven whispered. It wasn't even a question, it was a statement. An acknowledgment. A surrender.

"No, kid," Hopper's voice was tired and dry. "No you don't. We're going to take a stand. We're going to move forward and if he tries to come for you...well, he can try and see what happens."

She shook her head vigorously, unaccustomed to being the one holding things back instead of chomping at the bit to force Hopper forward.

"He can't take you unless you let him. He knows that, he's always known that. He controlled you by getting in your head because he knew he couldn't control you by force."

Brenner couldn't manhandle her when she was twelve, much less now, but he could convince her to not fight him. He spent her lifetime engineering her perception of reality so that she wouldn't use her powers against him. Hopper hoped that the life she'd experienced so far outside the lab would help her see through Brenner's manipulations, but he also knew she had a weakness. A weakness he himself had created.

If she found out how Hopper had betrayed her without giving him a

chance to explain, he didn't know how she'd react. She would definitely not trust him and he could imagine a thousand ways Brenner might exploit that. The secret, the secret he never wanted to tell her because it made him more vulnerable than he could bear now made her vulnerable as well and he couldn't allow that to happen. Even if it killed him to lose her, he owed her the truth.

"Look, kid. There's something you need to know. Something I'm sure he'll use to try to convince you but also something I should never have kept from you in the first place, I was just..."

...he was just so afraid of losing her, but telling her that wouldn't be fair. If she was going to find a way to not hate him, it couldn't be because she felt obligated to save him from himself. From the black hole. He left the sentence unfinished, refusing to be the latest person to wield her emotions like a weapon against her.

They sat a moment in silent darkness and for what felt like the millionth time, Hopper was grateful for Eleven's willingness to allow gaps in conversation so that he could gather his thoughts and his courage. There is something about the anonymity of darkness, about not being able to see the look on the other person's face, about not having to see the hurt and betrayal you know you're going to inflict, that makes it possible to say aloud what you had not thought possible.

"The night you killed the Demogorgon," He started and then stopped, searching for the words. "After you found Will and told us to hurry, I knew we had to get into that lab so we could get to the gate, you know? There was no way I was going to sneak into the building, the security was too tight. So I planned on getting myself caught figuring they'd take me inside. I thought that once I was inside, I could threaten to expose their operation if they didn't let me go in and save Will. I knew enough. I knew about you and your mom. I knew about the gate and what happened to Barb Holland. Except they didn't care about that. They didn't need to buy my silence by giving me Will, they could just kill me and be done with it. When they didn't kill me, I realized that the only thing I had that they wanted—" He paused in a doomed attempt to forestall the inevitable even for just one more second.



"—was me," Eleven finished his sentence for him.

"Yeah, kid," he admitted feeling as though he had surely sealed his own fate, "I told Brenner where you were. Will wasn't going to last much longer and I had to hope you had recovered enough to defend yourself. I didn't know what else to do. I understand if you hate me. I'll still do everything I can to get you a normal life, I'll think of something. I know Joyce would take you in somehow."

"Don't hate you." Of all the things he expected from her, a soft tone and a comforting squeeze to his forearm were not it. But even less expected where the words, "And also...I knew."

"What?"

"You had to go to the gate to find Will and then Papa came," she explained. "How else would he know?"

Eleven didn't know who Lando was at the time, but she remembered Dustin calling Hopper that after the Bad Men had found them at the Middle School. When she eventually watched the Star Wars movies, she understood the comparison though she did not take the same offense to it that the boys had. Up to that point, Eleven had never experienced a world where adults felt obligated to shelter and protect children for no reason other than adults are adults and children are children. The entire reason Eleven had been able to escape the night she opened the gate in the first place was because everyone else ran to save themselves from the Demogorgan and completely forgot about her until the danger had passed. The day she watched Mike jump off a cliff into the quarry to save Dustin was the first time she'd actually seen a genuinely selfless act, so she had no expectation that Hopper, who was little more than a stranger to her at the time, owed her anything.

Where Eleven was pragmatic, Hopper was principled. What she simply accepted as a lesser of evils decision Hopper had made under what she'd assumed and he'd confirmed were limited options, he considered to be an unforgivable breach of his sworn duty to protect and serve and they struggled to truly grasp the other's reaction.

"You've *known*? All this time?"

"Told you not to keep secrets." She was utterly unsympathetic about the mental torture he'd put himself through but still kind enough to leave the *you big idiot* off the end of her admonishment. He knew she was thinking it all the same.

He sank back against the wall, not yet having found his bearings after the emotional roller coaster they'd been on that evening.

"When I was in the woods, you brought me food," she volunteered and he listened intently. Neither one of them was particularly big on sharing and Eleven had spoken very little about that month she'd spent in the woods. "I watched, but I hid. Was afraid it was a trap."

"So what made you finally decide to show yourself?"

"I would have died in the woods," she responded simply. "Nothing to lose."

She didn't intend to wound him with her latest revelation, but he was overcome with a sense of self loathing nonetheless. In giving her nothing but a reason to believe he would give her over to the lab, he'd managed to put her further at risk to the point where it literally had to come down to a choice between him and death for her to be willing to risk trusting him. And yet, there she was, sitting next to him because regardless of what had passed between them initially, he was now the person who made her feel safe. The realization of just how every undeserving he was of the distinction was humbling.

"What do we do now?" she asked returning the conversation back to Papa and all of the implications that went along with him.

"Like I said," he told her resolutely, "we move forward as planned. I'd like to know where he is, exactly, but otherwise, we just make sure we're ready if he comes. You're not gonna spend your whole life hiding, kid."

**A/N I've been thinking a lot about Hopper telling Brenner where Eleven was and why he would do it. David Harbour describes him as a "man of justice," so it makes it particularly hard to make sense of a just man throwing one child to the wolves to save another. Even Joyce told Brenner to go to hell. Other than**

being desperate to save Will (who had become a sort of do over for failing to save Sara) and perhaps banking on Eleven being more capable of self defense than Will, there's no really objectively defensible reason for Hopper to have done what he did. He knows it's indefensible and he feels a lot of guilt about it, he was just out of other options.

For her part, at that point in the story, Eleven had been raised up to that point by a person who was a very "ends justify the means" sort of person so her expectations of other people must have been pretty low. The fact that Dustin figures out pretty quickly that Hopper sold them out makes me think Eleven realized it too. There also had to be a reason why she initially ran from Hopper in the woods. She knew who he was and she was starving and freezing, yet she didn't immediately show herself. She had to have a reason to not trust him, so I assume she knew or at least strongly suspected what Hopper had done. But, much like he acted out of desperation, so did she and eventually he became worth the risk.

I think that Hopper selling her out while her expectations of other people were still low and then taking her in and gaining her trust by taking care of her would make it a lot easier for her to accept than if it had happened the other way around. In any event, I think she's a lot more accepting of moral flexibility than most of the other characters on the show.

## 35. Chapter 35

"Ok," Mike blinked several times as though that would help him absorb the information, "just let me make sure I've got everything straight." The members of the party, with the exception of Max, were all sitting in the cabin's small living room. Mike and Will had, of course, told Dustin and Lucas of Eleven's plan look for Brenner in the Void, so they'd all come to the cabin at the first opportunity for the update. Surprisingly, the news that Brenner had survived the Demogorgon wasn't the biggest bombshell.

"Brenner's alive," Mike continued.

"Yes."

"And working in some other lab, somewhere?" Dustin inserted.

"That what it looked like."

"And Hopper's *still* letting you come out of hiding?" Will asked disbelieving.

"Yes."

"The same Hopper who practically bit my head off for trying to convince him to let you start school at the beginning of the year because he was worried the CIA was going to storm the school or something if you went to school after only ten months instead of a full year?" Mike had more or less made his peace with Hopper, but it was times like these when it was evident he still harbored a lingering resentment towards the man.

"Same one."

"Remember when I asked if he was sober and you guys thought I was being an asshole?" Dustin reminded them feeling a little smug. "Doesn't seem like such a stupid question *now*, does it?"

"You think it's a bad idea?" Eleven asked hesitantly. She wanted nothing more than to have a normal life, but the idea of just daring Papa to come get her seemed frighteningly brazen and she genuinely

wasn't sure if she wanted reassurance or an out.

"I think it's actually a really smart idea," Lucas reasoned. "The more people know you, the bigger deal it would be for you to go missing and the government wants everything they've covered up to stay covered. They don't want Hawkins to get any more attention."

"Exactly," Mike agreed, "If Hawkins makes national news again, the chances of everything they really did at the lab being found out go up. I'm just having a hard time believing that's how Hopper of all people sees it."

"Do you know where Brenner is?" Will asked. "It makes a difference whether he's down the street or halfway around the world, right?"

"First time, I lost him too quickly to tell," Eleven explained. "I had to go back."

"And?" The boys questioned her almost in a chorus.

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"Where the hell is *that*?" Across town, Joyce and Hopper were having the nearly identical conversation taking advantage of an otherwise empty Melvald's.

"Long Island."

"I knew this wasn't over," Joyce said bitterly.

"It's over for us."

"You don't think that's naive?" her anger at the circumstances caused her voice to be more sharp than she intended.

"What do you want to do about it, Joyce?" Hopper shot back sarcastically. "You actually wanna try storming a military base? Turn ourselves into Murray Bauman and go chasing down endless conspiracy theorists?"

Hopper was equally angry at the situation and being confronted by his helplessness made him bristle.

"I didn't say that. I just..." Joyce's voice failed her momentarily as she considered all of the terrible possibilities. "What if they come back here? What if Brenner wants to open another gate and he decides he needs El to do it?"

"She'll snap his neck."

"You sure about that?"

"Of course I'm sure."

Except that he wasn't. God help him, he wasn't sure Eleven had it in her. And Joyce knew it. For the same reason Jonathan didn't lose any sleep over *Lonnie* but Will still secretly hoped *Dad* would choose to be part of his life again, Eleven would struggle if she were confronted by *Papa*.

The trill of the store telephone prevented the argument from progressing further.

"Melvald's," Joyce answered. "...Hi, Mary...yeah we still have some sparklers left, why is Big Buy sold out?...I tell you what, if you can get them today, I'll put a few packs behind the counter for you...ok, see you later this afternoon ...bye."

She hung up the phone and they both waited a moment, weighing their respective next moves. "Well," Joyce finally broke the stalemate, "at least she went looking for him before we started any of the rumors. She can still stay off the radar."

"We're still doing it," Hopper told her flatly.

"Are you *insane*?" And then because she surprised even herself with her volume, she reverted to a sort of whisper yell. "No, we're not!"

"Joyce, think about it," Hopper reasoned. "Brenner's out there and we can't do anything about that. If he's hell bent on tracking El down and trying to get her back, what difference does it make if we bring her out now or six months from now or five years from now? It's not like

waiting for the government to decide Hawkins is safe enough to ignore. Brenner's not going to forget. He's either made up his mind to try and get her back when and wherever he finds her or he's already decided to cut his losses. More time won't change any of that."

"God damn it, Hop," she cursed the situation, not him, but it was alright because he understood the distinction. "This is never going to end is it? No matter what we do, something else is always going to come up."

"And we'll keep figuring it out. All we can do is take things as they come."

"You're not going to keep living out in the middle of nowhere like some kind of hermit, are you?" she poked at him as a peace offering.

"Figured I'd move us back into my place by the lake at least for now. Keep the cabin secret in case we need a safe house, you know?" Letting her know he had a back up plan was an unspoken admission that he was as scared as she was.

"I'll help you clean it up. You've put my house back together twice now, I feel like I owe you. And at least we know Dustin didn't try to turn your fridge into a makeshift morgue." It was funny now, but she might have actually smacked that boy at the time if he'd been stupid enough to get within arm's reach.

A bell announced a customer entering the store so Hopper simply said, "I'll let you know when," and left it at that.

What neither of them really realized because the change had been so subtle and because they were each so anxious about the news Brenner had survived was that they had subconsciously accepted that the decision concerning Eleven was discussed in terms of "we" and not just Hopper. Whether either one of them was ready to openly acknowledge it or not, they both intuitively accepted this was now a joint venture.

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"This is it, kid." The Byers' kitchen was reprising its role of make shift war room, the final steps towards making El legitimately public were officially underway. "We do this and there's no going back, so I'm leaving it up to you. You ready?"

"I'm ready," she confirmed, ignoring whatever lingering doubts she might have had.

"Alright, the only person who thinks she knows anything at this point is Flo."

"Who would never spread stories about you because she fusses over you like a mother hen," Joyce interrupted.

"She does not," he said defensively, "She steals my cigarettes and harasses me is what she does. The woman is a damned nuisance."

"We're going to need someone who hates you," Nancy clarified and then amended, "Who hates you and is a total gossip. Know anyone who fits that description?"

"Marissa...", Hopper drug out the final vowel while he searched his memory before finally giving up and finishing with, "whatever the hell her last name is. The librarian."

"We can do that," Johnathan volunteered.

"Look Jonathan," Nancy took on the tone of voice you might use to explain to someone it was time to put their dog to sleep. "I hate to tell you, but you're a terrible liar which is normally an admirable quality in a person, but not right now."

"I'm not that bad."

"Yes, you are," Joyce concurred.

"We'll go and we'll have her attention if we bring Dustin with us," Mike said.

"She watches him like a hawk to makes sure he doesn't steal any more books," Lucas added taking a jab at Dustin.



"You stole *library* books?" Hopper asked rather disparagingly.

"Technically not," Dustin argued, "because I brought them back."

"Yeah," Lucas teased, "after you stole them."

"It was an emergency!"

"Alright, enough!" Hopper put an end to the argument, "Just go get it done."

Before the boys piled out the front door to retrieve their bikes and head off towards town Mike gave Eleven one final nod. The moment was long enough in the making that it was hard to believe this was it.

"Are you ready?" she asked Hopper. They were the only two remaining at the kitchen table.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

"So...not at all?" She saw right through him. Damned perceptive kid.

"You deserve a life, kid," he said simply as he lit a cigarette to calm him. "Even if it makes me a nervous wreck."

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Not for this."

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"Dustin. Henderson." The librarian pronounced his name as though it was two separate sentences.

"Yes, ma'am?" Dustin responded knowing full well that his feigning cheerful ignorance was only going to annoy her further.

"What are you doing here?"

"Studying," he replied without missing a beat.

"It's summer."

"Honors English has a summer reading list, so we're meeting here to compare notes."

She narrowed her eyes, pursed her lips and glared at him. "I'll be watching you."

Dustin merely grinned at her and quipped, "I'll be looking forward to it."

"Smart ass," she muttered returning to the task of reshelving books.

"Why did you tell her that?" Lucas hissed.

"What?"

"Do you even know what's on the summer reading list?"

"Does she even know what's on the summer reading list?" Dustin volleyed back.

"Probably, she's the librarian."

"You know what's on every reading list this decade?" Dustin asked rhetorically as he snagged a book off a nearby shelf. "1984. Here, have at it."

"Everyone just find something and meet back at this table," Mike said cutting off the argument. "Once she's within earshot, we'll make sure she hears us talking."

The boys each found something to pretend to read and sat, pretending to ignore the librarian, but in reality being hyper aware of exactly where she was at all time. They spoke minimally and tried to remain as natural as possible, until she pushed her cart of returned books to the shelves behind them.

"Hey, Will?" Mike whispered too loudly across the table.

"What?" he whispered back.

Marissa was getting ready to shush them when Mike said, "Your mom's still friends with Chief Hopper, right?"

"Yeah?" Will was doing an excellent job of pretending he had no idea where this was going.

"So maybe you know. I heard a rumor he's got some long lost kid out there who tracked him down. Is it true?"

They heard a book drop behind them and they knew everything was going to plan.

"Where'd you hear that?" Will teased it out a little further.

"I heard my mom talking on the phone to someone," Mike lied smoothly.

"I'm not supposed to know so you *can't* repeat it," Will admonished knowing it would make the gossip that much more salacious, "but yeah, it's true."

The fake surprised whispers among the boys went unheard over the squeaking wheel of the returned book cart being pushed as quickly as an adult could justify moving through a library towards the break room and its telephone.

"Well that couldn't have gone better," Dustin observed.

"I give it twenty-four hours before everyone knows," Lucas ventured.

"I think you under estimate the resourcefulness of a librarian," Dustin responded. "I give it until dinner"

## 36. Chapter 36

In the absence of objective criteria for measuring the success of rumor spreading, the amount of time it took for the rumor they'd started to make it back to their respective families seemed like a fair benchmark.

In the Sinclair home, Erica (perhaps not so) innocently asked what a "bastard child" was and after surviving a threat to have her mouth washed out with soap if she ever repeated the offensive phrase again explained that's she'd overheard her friend's mother talking on the phone saying that Chief Hopper has one of those kinds of kids.

"Erica, you know better than to spread gossip," Mrs Sinclair admonished.

"I'm not spreading gossip," she insisted, "I'm just telling you what Tiffany's mom said."

Lucas set aside his irritation that Erica could get away with sass that would never fly coming from him and silently celebrated the victory of their strategically leaked information.

Claudia Henderson was more direct and just came out and asked Dustin if he knew anything, Dustin being friends with Will and the Byers' being closer to Hopper than anyone else in town.

Karen Wheeler had heard the news at the grocery store and was itching to ask Michael for the same reason Claudia Henderson assumed Dustin knew the truth of the matter, but didn't feel like she could just ask, so she tried to find a way to work it into the dinner conversation. She reported on what she and Holly had done that day, asked Nancy what she had been up to and then zeroed in on Mike.

"So, Michael?

"Yeah?"

"I've barely seen you or your friends this summer," she remarked casually, "Did you four find a better basement?"

"It's summer, Mom. We've just doing stuff," he responded vaguely.

"Well, as long as you're staying out of trouble, I guess. You've been a different kid since Christmas, I'd hate to see you slide back into bad behaviors," it was as though she didn't even realize how much of a left handed compliment that was.

"I'm fine, Mom," his annoyance was evident in his tone.

"I didn't think he was going to have that much of a positive affect on you, but spending time with Chief Hopper has really kept you out of trouble," Karen continued, still hoping to naturally steer the conversation towards what she wanted to know. "Of course, the way I hear it, he isn't going to have as much free time now."

She looked meaningfully at Mike who pointedly avoided looking at Nancy because if he did, he wouldn't be able to keep a straight face.

"What is that supposed to mean, Karen?" Ted Wheeler was generally in the habit of tuning out his wife, but they'd been married for long enough that he knew fishing when he heard it.

"Well," she said slowly, "it's just that I heard he has a child who's going to be coming to live with him."

"I thought his daughter died years ago," Ted wondered aloud.

"Well, I think it's great, personally," Nancy announced and Mike barely avoided choking on his glass of milk. "I'm sure there are a lot of men who have kids they were never told about, but I doubt very many would step up and take them once they found out." And then because she knew how to exploit her father's prejudices, "It's a lot better than being some kind of deadbeat dad, right?"

Not for the first time, Mike marveled at Nancy's intuitive ability to manipulate their parents. Without saying anything objectionable, she'd simultaneously shamed their mother, brought their father into alliance with Hopper and artfully disclosed an additional detail that would no doubt be added to the general pool of public knowledge the next day.

"Well, of course it's always better to take responsibility," Karen said

backpedaling and the conversation just sort of stagnated as Mike inhaled the last of his dinner so he could get the hell out of the dining room.

For his part, Hopper considered the rumor to have come full circle when it made its way back to the station in the form of his long time secretary suddenly feeling the need to tell him she was leaving for the day even though she had never been in the habit of doing so.

"Ok," he told her not bothering to look up from the plans for street closures to accommodate the annual Fourth of July parade.

"If I leave your keys here on your desk, will you lose them?"

"I'm sure I'll manage somehow."

"I need the shift schedules back from you tomorrow if you want to stay on rotation," she reminded him as she looked over his office for any unfinished work he might be hiding.

"Where did you leave those for me?" He finally looked up.

"They're right here," she told him pointing to a folder.

"Ah. Under my keys then."

He knew damn good and well why she was stalling, but he enjoyed toying with her because she was usually blunt to the point of being abrasive. "I thought you were going home, Flo," he said calling her out on what they both knew was pretense, "Is there a reason you're still standing there?"

"I heard the latest rumors," she finally told him.

"Did you now?" he asked rhetorically. This was the Flo he knew. Cut right to the chase. "That didn't take long."

"We all know how fast news travels around here. Will we be meeting him? Her?"

"Her. And yeah. Eventually."

"Does she have a name?"

"Jane," and then he figured he may as well lay the foundation for her chosen name as well as her given name so he amended, "Jane Elizabeth." He'd heard the story of the kids passing her off as Mike's cousin Eleanor so he didn't want to reuse that name on the off chance it triggered anyone's memory and Elizabeth was the only viable alternative that came to him on short notice. He hoped she wouldn't object.

"I think this will be good for you," she told him matter of factly.

"That so?"

"It's not good for a person to be alone so much," she said on her way out the door.

He snorted softly. Little did she know, he'd barely had time to himself since Eleven came to live with him. His days of working until it was late enough to either hit the bars in search of a pretty face to warm his bed or go home and drink himself into numbness were long over. He hadn't been on a proper date since Will Byers disappeared (or a one night stand since he'd been found). Flo was right about one thing though: Eleven had been good for him.

For any parent to lose a child under any circumstance is soul crushing in a way that can never be sufficiently articulated. There is nothing right or fair about the loss of a child. But when there is a person at fault, the anger over the injustice of that child's death can be aimed at someone. When a child is claimed by illness, the only thing to be angry at is life in all of its arbitrariness. Eleven would never be a replacement for Sara; that would be a disservice to both girls. But she was an opportunity for life in all of its arbitrariness to redeem itself.

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Eleven knew to expect Hopper late for the next several days while he

spent time fixing up the trailer after work. It was never exactly homey to start with, but add to that the fact that he'd hadn't exactly put it back together after he'd searched it for bugs and then left it vacant for a year and a half and the trailer had reached the level of a certified disaster area. In fairness, the cabin had also been a mess when he'd first brought her there, but setting up the cabin together had been a way for the two of them to create their own space. They'd gotten used to each other's presence working alongside one another without the pressure of spending time together with no distractions. It was a process that allowed them to each create a fresh start. In contrast, the abandoned trailer held the remnants of his past that he didn't want to drag Eleven into.

November 1983 had been a wake up call for Hopper. In particular, being detained and tortured in an interrogation room, desperately wanting to reach Will and being made aware of just how easy it would be to pass off his death as an overdose had been a revelation. And if there was any room left for doubt or denial, it was made crystal clear just how vulnerable he'd made himself a few days later when he was picked up outside the hospital by a darkly tinted vehicle for his first meeting with Dr. Owens to discuss the quid pro quo relationship he wasn't given any sort of option to decline. He went home that night, gathered gathered up every prescription bottle he could lay hands on and disposed of the contents right then and there in an attempt to rid himself of his self imposed Achilles heel. Cleansing the trailer of anything other than the various and sundry orange bottles had not been a particularly high priority and within a month, he was only going to the trailer often enough to give the pretense of living there. So it was, figuratively and literally, the last of the mess he'd made of his life and it was finally time to clean it up.

While Hopper worked to pack away the vestiges of his most self destructive period, Eleven tolerated the nights of being alone knowing that there was a purpose to it. It also helped that between being told she should spend as much time as possible engaged in conversation with other people and feeling guilty about leaving her for long hours, Hopper had been convinced to expand the visitation hours and to add an extra day. At this rate, it felt like the boys were spending more time in his cabin than he was.



The first evening, he didn't let Joyce know what he was up to because he wanted an opportunity to clear out the worst of the trailer on his own. He filled up the back of the Blazer with bagged garbage and took it to the dump before returning home so late that he had to wake Eleven up to get her to open the cabin's locks. The whole process was surprising cathartic.

But after that first night, he discovered that he actually enjoyed the help, the company and the freedom of having nothing left to hide. Joyce came armed with cleaning supplies, Hopper with hot pizza and cold beer and they set to work.

"Jesus, Hop, what the hell happened to your sofa?" Joyce asked upon seeing the poorly patched together upholstery.

"Remember when I figured out my house was bugged? I had to search through everything to find the wire tap."

"Including your furniture?"

"I didn't want to leave anything to chance." These were, after all the same people who went so far as to create a convincing fake corpse for Will. "I figured duct tape was a good enough short term fix, but then I wasn't in here very long before I started living in the cabin."

"Please tell me you're replacing it."

"Yes, I'm replacing it. I just have to get around to doing it."

Joyce moved into the adjacent kitchen and began to empty and sort the contents of the cabinets while Hopper used his height to his advantage and targeted the light fixtures he had never completely reassembled.

"Did you realize you don't have two single plates that match?" She asked him surveying the array of dishes now stacked on the counter while she pulled out fresh shelf paper to line the cabinets.

"I did realize that, actually, I've just never cared."

"And how is it you have seventeen forks and no spoons?" she was now clearly amused.

"Diane gave me a box of kitchen stuff after the divorce and I didn't have the energy to question it."

"Which would explain why none of your pot lids are the same size as any of your pots. She was really fucking with you, wasn't she?"

"I checked out, she got angry," Hopper shrugged. "We all grieve in our own way, I guess."

"You're very understanding about it. You're a bigger person than I am."

"I wasn't at the time," he corrected, "I'm only a bigger person in hindsight."

They each returned to their respective projects and repairs. Hopper was lost in the task of bringing a water heater back to life when Joyce called out to him from the back bedroom.

"Hey Hop? What's in these boxes?"

"I'm not sure," he called back. "Those are from Diane. She just kind of decided what I should have. Once I found my clothes and stuff I needed to eat, I stopped looking through them."

She leaned backwards out of the bedroom into the hallway so he would be sure to see her disbelieving eyebrow. "You've been divorced for what? Six years now? How have you not even looked?"

"Seeing as how she gave me only mismatched dishes and no spoons, I'm sure it's all crap."

"Do you care if I look?" Joyce was now totally intrigued.

"Help yourself," he said it nonchalantly but if the boxes were going to be opened anyway, he couldn't ignore it. He took a break from the water heater having made a mental list of supplies he needed, grabbed a couple of beers from the fridge and handed one to Joyce as he joined her on the floor.

The first box was a disappointing assortment of Christmas decorations, mostly broken. "In fairness," Hopper told her, "that could

have happened before or after they'd been packed."

They went immediately into the growing "take to the dump" pile. Several boxes contained an assortment of knick knacks, linens and books. Hopper dragged them all to the "take to the thrift store" pile and brought them each a fresh beer. The project was feeling a lot more disappointing than Joyce had hoped.

"Jackpot!" Joyce gleefully announced when she opened the eighth box. "Pictures! And not just any pictures," she added looking into a manilla envelope, "wedding pictures."

"Those are going in the dump pile," Hopper tried taking the entire envelope out of her hand, but she held it out of his reach.

"Oh come on," she pleaded holding up a very traditional, very staged, very not Jim Hopper photo of him in a really awful suit posing next to Diane in a gauzy off the shoulder gown, "you should keep at least one. You don't think Eleven will get a kick out of this?"

"You don't think she'll use that picture to find Diane?" he countered.

"Oh shit, didn't think about that."

"Don't worry, you'll get the hang of her," he assured, taking the offending picture out of her hand and relegating the entire thing to the dump pile. "Don't give her pictures of people you don't want her spying on. She's terrible about resisting temptation."

Joyce continued to look through envelopes of photos, "Vacation...Christmas...I'm assuming this is some sort of promotion ceremony?...vacation...some kind of party...and oh..." Joyce's voice fell flat.

"What?"

"Sara," she said softly as she passed him a packet of pictures. "Did you know about these? Sorry, stupid question." He'd never looked in the boxes, how could he have known?

"No, I assumed..." and then words failed Hopper as he was taken back looking at pictures he'd forgotten ever existed ranging from infancy

to just before she got sick. After several moments, he elaborated, "I took a few things," the hairband, some drawings, a couple pictures, their copy of *Anne of Green Gables* "but Diane had such a hard time parting with anything," and because she blamed him, rational or not, "I never would have guessed she would have volunteered anything else."

"You want to call it a night?" Joyce asked, suddenly feeling like she was intruding. "I'm sure you weren't expecting those. They're kind of a gut punch."

"No, it's ok," and for the first time perhaps ever, that wasn't a lie. Hopper could finally look at those pictures and remember those times fondly without the anger and regret and guilt being tangled up with it. "Really, I'm ok."

"Let's set them aside. You can pick some to frame and we'll put the rest in their own book."

"Yeah, alright," he told her somewhat absently before setting that envelope of pictures in a safe place.

The next two boxes were, thankfully unremarkable odds and ends and finally they were down to the final one.

"Last box," Joyce told him. "Wanna guess what's in it?"

"You really are taking a lot more joy in this than me," he pointed out blandly, though he had to admit, it was nice to not have them just sitting taking up the back bedroom of the trailer.

"And the verdict is..." she paused to slice through the aging packing tape with her car keys, "stuff from high school!"

"Well that can all go straight to the dump."

"Don't you dare!" Joyce covered the box protectively and he just smiled.

"Let's see what we have in here," she continued. "It's your letterman sweater—"

"—that you wore more than me," he recalled.

"—and graduation program...football team t-shirt...oh good grief, a library book? I'm telling Dustin you're as bad as he is...oh and more pictures!"

He leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes, allowing the memories of simpler time to flood back.

"Twenty-five year reunion is next year," Joyce commented, "Wanna go?"

"You asking me on a date?" he teased.

"You wish," she scoffed. "I'm asking if you want to go, I didn't say I was going."

Joyce continued thumbing through the stack of old photos. "Oh. My. God."

"Now what?" Hopper opened one eye. There was no telling what Joyce might find in there.

"Is this what I think it is?" She held up a small black and white photo yellowed with age.

"No," he said quickly.

"Yes it is, you big liar. Its the picture of us at homecoming you had taped inside your locker!"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"So you are at least a little sentimental," she needed.

"Well, I didn't have one from prom because you dumped me," he needed her right back.

"Oh, God, don't remind me," Joyce groaned. "One of my worst decisions."

"I'm flattered," he deadpanned in return.

"Oh no," she clarified, "you were an ass. Dumping you was a good decision. At least it was at the time. Dumping you for Lonnie was the bad decision."

"You're terrible for my ego, you know that?" he asked, sounding as wounded as possible. He wasn't really wounded.

"Eh," she waived him off, "your ego can take a few hits."

"You're right though."

"That your ego can take a few hits?"

"No, that I was an ass," he admitted.

"You were seventeen. I'm not going to hold that against you forever. And you weren't all bad."

"Gee. Thanks," he mocked while squeezing her knee affectionately.

"I mean, let's be honest," she nudged him back, "I wasn't perfect either."

"I was going to be nice and not point that out," he teased and she had the decency to play along and look offended.

"Oh and look, you have our senior year book," she pulled it from the bottom of the box. "Mine got lost a long time ago."

She moved next to Hopper so they could both look at the book together, slowly turning through the pages of composite photos until she found the two of them.

"I haven't looked at this thing since they handed them out," Hopper admitted. "Were we really that young?"

"No," she said dismissively, "not possible."

She sighed to herself, lost in time and memories.

"What are you thinking?" he asked her.

"What the me in this picture would think about my life now."

"I guess that depends. Is the you in that picture before or after you started hating me? Because if it was after, she'd probably be pretty pissed at you hanging out with me." Joyce glared at him and he laughed.

"I feel like I've made a mess of my life," she admitted and he nodded in commiseration.

"The thing about being that age," he paused to pull a cigarette from his breast pocket and light it, "is your entire life is still potential, not reality. What's possible is always more exciting than what already is, but eventually you actually have to go live your life."

"Yeah, I guess," she allowed taking the cigarette from him for a pull.

"And it's not a complete mess," he continued, the roll of resident optimist unfamiliar to him. "You've got your boys."

"And it may have taken me two decades to get it right, but I did manage to lose Lonnie and get you back," she told him and they locked eyes with the intensity of a man dying of thirst setting sight on a desert oasis.

He had the presence of mind to extinguish the shared cigarette into the flat remained of a nearby can of beer before leaning in to accept the kiss she offered.

"So are we doing this now?" He echoed her words back into her lips, their forehead still touching.

"I don't know. I'm not exactly working with a plan here," she told him completing the mirror image *deja vu* before adding, "but I'm willing to take the risk. Just promise me we won't screw things up again."

"Of course we'll screw things up," he told her honestly. "But I promise we won't go twenty years without putting them back together."

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Eleven woke up on the sofa to an empty cabin. The few stations the cabin's rabbit ear antenna could pick up were no longer broadcasting, the flickering light from television static made the emptiness even more pronounced. Hopper's bed was clearly not slept in and the red numbers of his digital alarm clock read 11:57.

And so it was that she found herself alone, late at night, worried about Hopper with the television conveniently tuned into static. Eleven knew she wasn't supposed to use the Void to spy on Hopper because she was bored or curious, but this was different. Hopper should have been home hours ago. He could be in danger and how else would she know if she didn't look?

She tied the blindfold around her head and concentrated on Hopper, letting her consciousness sink into the blackness. It took a moment for Eleven to register what she was seeing. There was Hopper...tangled up with Mrs Byers. Eleven was so shocked, she lost her concentration and was instantly out of the Void and back on the sofa. She was hardly the first child to walk in on a parent during an intimate moment, but she was probably one of the few who was more pleased about it than disturbed.

"Only took 437 cranes, not a thousand," she said aloud in the empty cabin more than a little satisfied with herself.



## 37. Chapter 37

A/N This chapter is one of the shorter ones, but the last two were longer, so it all evens out.

I'm planning one more chapter for this story. I've managed to distract myself for 8 whole months with this project (which is about halfway to S3, right?) and I've enjoyed hearing from so many people. It's sparked a lot of really interesting conversations. I'm getting ready to go off the grid for the holiday weekend (yay remote camping during forest fire season!) but I look forward to seeing people's thoughts when I return to civilization.

See further notes at the end. I have thoughts on this, but its better to see how this chapter unfolds before you read them.

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When Hopper finally returned home, he had to knock loudly several times before Eleven woke up enough to unlock the door. She had fallen asleep on the sofa waiting for Hopper to return and confirm what she knew but he didn't know she knew about Mrs Byers. She'd envisioned a conversation, but what he actually did was carry her to her bed, tuck her in and close her door behind him with barely a word.

She came to the breakfast table assuming he would tell her then, but he acted like there was nothing whatsoever out of the ordinary.

"Boys coming today?" He asked her casually.

"Around lunch," she responded between bites of scrambled egg.

He nodded but didn't add anything else. It wasn't as though they intended to keep the evolving nature of their relationship a secret, it just didn't make sense to bring the kids into the middle of something

they themselves weren't yet ready to define. As far as Eleven was concerned, however, it was downright infuriating to know Hopper was keeping a secret from her but to not be able to confront him on it. She considered outing herself and just dealing with Hopper being angry but there was a part of her that worried Hopper would actually distance himself from Mrs. Byers if El pushed him. So she went against every impulsive instinct she had and kept her discovery to herself...or at least to herself and her friends.

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The next few weeks were a series of slow leaks. After the initial ripple of the philandering police chief having unknowingly fathered a child had passed without raising any national security red flags, additional details were similarly disclosed to hungry gossips. As expected, there were those who frowned upon the incontrovertible evidence of Hopper's already well known indiscretions and those who smugly took joy in what they incorrectly presumed to be his misfortune, but for the most part, people simply accepted it. It was 1985, after all. Jane Hopper's carefully constructed back story was now common knowledge even though no one had actually met her seeing as how she was supposedly spending the summer with her aunt while she got to know her father.

Late summer was brutal in Indiana. The heat and humidity conspired together to suffocate the residents of Hawkins and even though the Police Station benefited from window mounted air conditioning units, it was still oppressively hot. Hopper sat in his darkened office, the drone of the oscillating fan practically hypnotizing him to the point where he was genuinely startled when his phone rang.

"Murray Bauman is here," Flo announced in a bored and tired tone.

Hopper groaned and rolled his eyes weighing the relative distastefulness of actually dealing with Bauman against leaving him unsupervised around the other officers. "Send him back," he told her, lighting a cigarette.

Flo walked Murray to the office and held up five fingers behind his

back to which Hopper nodded discretely. It was their established code that she would interrupt him with a "very important" call in five minutes and give him a way to get rid of the unwanted visitor.

"What is it now, Murray?"

"I've been digging further into the lab," Murray knew from prior experience that these conversations never lasted long and he wasn't wasting time.

"The lab is shut down," Hopper responded as though that made everything moot. He sure as hell wasn't going to disclose the fact that Brenner was alive and working on something in another facility a mere 800 miles away.

"The *building* is shut down, do you honestly think the CIA would stop Brenner's work after he successfully managed to demonstrate that things like telekinesis are real? That there are other dimensions we can access? The operation might have moved, but it's still going on somewhere."

As much as he didn't really care to hear him out, Hopper figured that it was better to at least know what ghosts Murray was chasing in case he might do something that would draw attention back to El. It was too late to pull back their plans to take her public, Murray had to know that, so his timing felt particularly suspect.

"Alright," he told Murray, careful not to appear too interested, "let's hear it. What do you think they're doing now?"

"Honestly, Jim, I question how in the hell you managed to figure out as much as you did. Just think about it for a minute. Hawkins National Lab was supposedly conducting experiments on drug induced extra sensory perception on college kids who just wanted to get high on government LSD. What Brenner was *actually* doing was identifying test subjects with innate psionic abilities including Terry Ives."

"We already know all this, Murray," Hopper told him impatiently.

"You've seen this picture here, right?" he asked sliding a grainy

newspaper photograph of a group of adults in hospital gowns including Terry Ives posing with Brenner.

"Yeah, what of it?"

"It was taken in 1970 either shortly before or right after Terry Ives got pregnant. Every patient in this picture is now either missing or catatonic. You've got Brenner here on the right, but did you ever stop and wonder who this other guy in the lab coat is at the back? That's Robert Sinsheimer. He's a geneticist. So you have to ask yourself, why would Brenner be working with a geneticist?"

Typically Murray didn't require or even anticipate a two sided conversation, preferring the sound of his own voice with an uninterrupted monologue, but he paused here and looked expectantly at Hopper.

"Ok, I'll bite, why would Brenner be working with a geneticist?"

"Don't you see? He couldn't keep looking for and abducting children with abilities. At the very least it's inefficient and even for the CIA it's potentially high profile. Meanwhile, a child born into captivity doesn't have a family to go looking for them or any sort of paper trail for anyone to follow. He was trying to create a breeding program."

"That seems like a bit of a reach." It actually didn't seem like a reach at all. It seemed entirely plausible. Horribly, horribly plausible.

"In 1975, Brenner had multiple meetings with a British doctor, Patrick Steptoe," Murray continued.

"I assume that's supposed to mean something?"

"I'll simplify it for you. You ever heard of a test tube baby?"

"Yeah?"

"Steptoe is one of the two doctors who perfected the procedure. The first test tube baby was successfully conceived two years later after a series of meetings between him and Brenner, of course, a mysterious infusion of research funding from an undisclosed source. I'm telling you, it's all there plain as day for anyone willing to open their eyes.

The lab may be shut down but there could be literally hundreds if not thousands of frozen embryos stored God only knows where."

Anywhere, really. Such as in a subterranean military base on Long Island. Just as an example.

"Ok, assuming you're right - " Hopper was at least going to try to diffuse the situation.

"Oh, I'm definitely right."

"Assuming *for the sake of argument only* that you're right, how do you propose proving anything? You're not talking about real live people hidden away in labs, you're talking about freezers. Maybe one freezer, maybe hundreds. They could be anywhere and you'd never know. And even if you found some, you have no way of knowing how many are out there. There's nothing you could do anyway."

"We could expose them." There was no way Hopper was getting into anything involving the word "*we*" with Murray Bauman.

"Yeah? And who would believe you?"

"Anyone who meets Eleven, for starters. You take her public with her abilities and not just as some random illegitimate child and you blow this whole thing wide open."

The change in Hopper's demeanor was nearly instantaneous. "You leave her out of this," he told him darkly, "or I swear to God, they'll come for you and I'll tell them where to find you."

Murray was accustomed to pissing people off and it was a rare conversation between him and Hopper that Hopper didn't make *some* sort of threat, but this was different. Murray Bauman knew Hopper was in bed with at least certain government entities given that he was part of the Barbara Holland cover up, but he'd misjudged the man's willingness to expose even those elements of the government to which Hopper shouldn't have any personal loyalties such as the people who were responsible for this stray child he'd taken it upon himself to raise. The idea that Hopper had and was willing to use the sort of connections that made inconvenient people simply disappear

had not previously occurred to Bauman, but it was glaringly obvious to him now.

Because he knew there was no way Murray was going to just drop anything, Hopper did the only thing he could think of under the circumstances: he gave him another trail to follow.

"You leave Eleven out of this and you leave Hawkins out of this," he repeated the warning emphasizing the threat by standing up and looming dangerously over Bauman, "but..." Hopper paused considering briefly the wisdom of this particular strategy before deciding to move forward anyway. "...there is another way. Remember when you said there was someone out there hunting down people from the lab? She's the only other survivor we know about. She's older and she's more interested in vengeance than she is in trying to live some kind of normal life. You find her and I'm sure she'll be happy to run with this. But I'm not bullshitting you on this. One word gets out about Eleven, I'm holding you personally responsible and you know you can't hide from her."

They were interrupted by Hopper's office phone. "Yeah?" he answered gruffly.

"Five minutes are up," Flo told him and added, "you're welcome" before hanging up the phone.

"I have to deal with that," Hopper lied. "Don't think I'm not dead serious. You've got your lead, now go track down this other girl stay out of my town."

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**A/N Because I don't think Murray Bauman's could really agree just sit on the truth about Eleven and what was going on at HNL, he would have continued to look for a way to get out the non-watered down version of the story. In Beyond Stranger Things, Gelman talks about how Bauman actually has a daughter from whom he becomes estranged because of his obsessiveness. Someone like that couldn't just walk away knowing what**

Bauman knows.

Along side of that, I was looking at the major scientific developments of the era. We know Terry got involved with Brenner for some period of time before she got pregnant. Eleven was born in 1971, so Terry would have gotten pregnant around 1970 leaving her as an MK Ultra participant in probably 1968 and 1969, right about the time when the real MK Ultra's use of LSD was being phased out. It would be historically accurate for Brenner to start to give up on generating LSD induced psychic abilities and start relying on innate psychic abilities.

In 1985, the Human Genome Project (which didn't actually get rolling until 1990) was pitched for the first time. Nothing like that just crops up out of nowhere, so presumably the people involved (notably Dr. Robert Sinsheimer) would have been leaders in the genetics field for years prior. I would also assume that, given the success of Eleven as the only (as far as we know) "second generation" person with psychic abilities, Brenner would be actively pursuing some sort of genetic explanation for why Eleven's powers are so significantly greater than Terry's (and not just based on some BF Skinner type theory on nurture over nature).

Finding a genetic link for psychic abilities would have been a huge advancement for Brenner, making it unnecessary to wait to find someone exhibiting psychic abilities, kidnap them, cover it up, etc. What would also make that very neat and tidy would be to not have any more Terrys filing law suits or storming the building trying to get their children back. Eleven would have been approximately seven when the first successful "test tube baby" was born using IVF. Again, that science was years in the making and Brenner would have been particularly well served by seeing it perfected.

So anyway, fun with history.

## 38. Chapter 38

**A/N Yeah, I know. Probably thought I was never coming back to finish this. It's a lot of loose ends to tie up.**

Eleven's first official day being out of hiding started at the breakfast table with a dangerous number of calories. It was a different table in a different kitchen in different house that Eleven was still getting used to, but the familiar ritual of sitting down to breakfast opposite Hopper was grounding. "Special day," he told her by way of explanation when she looked at the pile of whipped cream and candy laden waffles in front of her, confused because they hadn't argued recently and yet Hopper was giving her what she came to think of as the peace offering breakfast.

"First thing on our list today," he told her between bites, "is to meet with the guidance counselor."

"Guidance counselor?"

"Kind of like a teacher, except they don't actually work in the classrooms. They help you pick your classes and give you advice about getting into college and things."

Eleven swallowed hard. She'd set her sights on simply attending high school and surviving her own childhood, the idea of planning beyond that felt daunting.

"Don't worry about it, kid," Hopper told her, picking up on the uptick in her anxiety levels. "One thing at a time, yeah?"

"Yes," she agreed.

"You and the boys filled out the forms for which classes you want, right?"

First semester schedules were mailed out to all registered students a month before school started which allowed the Party to compare notes. Eleven was sure to sign up for classes where she would be guaranteed to be with at least one friend at all times, preferably Mike



if at all possible. Most importantly, Mike made sure to sign up as a peer tutor during fourth period and told Eleven to sign up for that study hall. "That gives us a whole hour after lunch to hang out," he had explained to her during his last visit.

Instead of answering Hopper's question, she pointed at the stack of papers sitting on the coffee table before turning back to the table, eyes not particularly focused on anything. He noticed how she'd gone quiet but didn't quite know what to do about it. "And then once we're done with that, how about we go see Joyce at the store? Maybe get you what you need for school?" That brought an actual smile to her face, but she still only nodded.

The trailer wasn't nearly as remote as the cabin and it wasn't necessary to walk through the woods to get to Hopper's car. It was quite a bit more convenient and a lot less secure. Truthfully, neither Hopper nor Eleven was entirely happy about the loss of the trip wire, but sacrifices had to be made. The drive to the high school required them to drive through the middle of town, something Eleven rarely saw. She noted the police station and wondered if the infamous Flo was working and when she might get to meet her. She saw the library and allowed herself to wonder why it was the librarian disliked Hopper so much before she was distracted by a severe looking man with a mustache and receding hairline walking out of a diner with a paper cup of coffee.

Neil Hargrove inexplicably tripped over a flat, empty sidewalk and managed to pour hot coffee down the front of his white shirt in the process.

"Really?" Hopper asked her sarcastically without even having to look at her to know that she was the cause.

"It wasn't a *tree*," she justified with the hint of a self satisfied smile in her eyes.

"Just...," Hopper thought briefly about reprimanding her, but amended himself mid sentence, "...don't get caught, ok? And *especially* don't get caught by Joyce, she'll blame me for encouraging you."

Hopper had explained El's story in advance when he made the

appointment so she didn't have to suffer through the well meaning but unintentionally patronizing concern that was the stock and trade of the high school guidance counselor. Hopper extinguished his cigarette as they pulled into the high school parking lot trying to hide his own nervousness. Introducing Eleven to outsiders "in character" so to speak reminded him of his first time going under cover. "All we have to do," he reminded her as he unclipped his seat belt, "is walk in there, meet a couple people, hand in your paperwork and you're done, alright? You don't have to talk much if you don't feel like it, just make eye contact with people when they're talking to you and I'll try and control the conversation."

"I'm ready," she said resolutely. She wasn't, but she was prepared to pretend.

The high school reminded her a great deal of the middle school. She took in the concrete cinder block walls painted an industrial shade of white and fought to control images of a long dead Demogorgon crashing through the walls. The florescent lights flickered slightly and Hopper raised an eyebrow towards her in wordless question. "Fine," she told him and he was gracious enough not to call her out on the lie.

"Can I help you?" a middle aged woman asked as they stepped into the school administrative offices.

"Yeah, we need to get her signed up for school," Hopper responded, "I called ahead."

A look of recognition came over the woman's face as she registered what Hopper had said. "Of course, of course," she said apologetically pointing at her desk calendar, "and here you are in black and white. My morning evidently got away from me. Jane Hopper?"

When she gave no response, Hopper inconspicuously nudged El with his foot. "Yes," she said startled, adding awkwardly, "that's me."

"It's a little early in the morning for summer," Hopper smoothly offered as an excuse for El's absent minded demeanor and the school receptionist smiled knowingly. Anything before noon was considered early for most high school student during the summer months. "She

prefers to use her middle name."

"No problem at all, I'll just note that on our attendance records. My husband is the same way. Wouldn't think to respond to his given name if you shouted it in his ear. Have a seat, Mrs. Walters will be with you shortly."

They could see through the windowed offices that the aforementioned Mrs. Walters was on the phone, trying in vain to get out anything more than a syllable, no doubt trying to soothe the nerves of some neurotic parent. Hopper thought that the job of high school guidance counselor must be Hell on earth and given what Hopper's actual job entailed, that was saying something. When she finally emerged with a forced smile plastered on her tired face, she was conveniently ready to get El in and out of her office as quickly as possible so she could take an early lunch.

"You must be Jane?" the woman greeted El, extending her hand.

"Yes," El replied, this time without any prompting and accepted the woman's hand. Eleven still found the whole custom of handshaking to be rather odd (and when pressed to explain why people shake hands, Hopper had to admit, it was an arbitrary exercise), but she'd been convinced that regardless of how little sense it made, she had to play along for the sake of fitting in.

"She uses her middle name." the secretary corrected causing Mrs. Walters to look back at her freshly notated file.

"Elizabeth?"

"El," Eleven corrected gaining confidence the longer the conversation went on.

"Well then, El, lets get you all signed up, shall we?"

Hopper and Eleven walked back into the parking lot less than a half hour later, class schedule, a list of necessary supplies and locker assignment in hand.

"Your schedule matches up to the other kids'?" Hopper asked her once they were safely in the Blazer.

"Yes," she verified happily. "And study hall with Mike."

"That's for studying, not just hanging out," Hopper told her hypocritically having never once in his entire academic career used a study hall for actual studying. She rolled her eyes at him and he was glad to see her looking less like she was being walked into a firing squad.

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For twelve years, Eleven was studied, watched and monitored every moment of every day to the point where the entire concept of privacy was alien and meaningless. Then for nearly two years, she was either alone and isolated or in the company of the people she'd adopted as her own family. The first time Eleven walked through Hawkins in broad daylight, glued to Hopper's side like her life depended on it, she realized just how invasive it was to be openly stared at now that she had something completely different to compare it to. Going from being on display, to invisible back to being on display again was more jarring than she'd anticipated.

"We'll walk down the street to see Joyce, just like we planned, yeah?"

"Yes," she agreed, trying to ignore the curious onlookers.

*It's ok, Eleven. Don't be frightened. These are all friends.* Papa had told her the last time he paraded her in front of a room filled with strange men in white lab coats. "Ignore them, kid. They're just a bunch of nosy assholes," Hopper assured her as she tightened her grip on his hand and he stared right back at people in a way he knew was uncomfortable. It didn't end the staring, but his efforts didn't go unnoticed either. Much like the disparity between being invisible and on display made her realize the unnaturalness of being on display, Hopper's protectiveness only highlighted Papa's inadequacies.

El looked down a side street and saw the sign for the Palace Arcade.

"Mike might be there," she told him hopefully and pointed out the building.

"Not today, kid," he told her. "You have to actually *meet* the boys before you start hanging out with them, remember?"

Eleven acquiesced and followed Hopper towards the general store leaving curious onlookers in her wake.

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The only other times El had been in a store, she hadn't really shopped so much as shop lifted. She didn't understand the difference then, although, even if she had, she probably wouldn't have cared. Will was the person who had introduced the whole concept of money to her, mostly to explain that some people had more of it than others. Much like hand shaking, Eleven thought the whole thing very strange, but was convinced that there were some rules you just needed to accept even if you didn't think them particularly logical. The looming threat that Hopper would not take her to any stores ever again was no small motivator in accepting this particular rule.

Melvald's was dominated by back to school displays. Bins of unbroken crayons with the paper wrappers still on, boxes of pencils with no teeth marks in them and unblemished erasers, blank composition books, full bottles of glue, packets of lined paper, an array of brightly colored folders devoid of doodles or bent edges to them and a whole host of other things Eleven couldn't identify. Even though she wasn't certain what all of the items were for, she enjoyed the fact that they smelled so...new. For the rest of her life, Eleven would associate the smell of office supplies with fresh starts and new opportunities.

"Hey, Hop," Mrs. Byers greeted him from behind the register, her familiar voice broke Eleven's reverie. "Good to see you, Sweetie" she whispered conspiratorially to El and she smiled back.

"Going ok?" Joyce asked vaguely.

"As expected," he responded, equally vague. "We just came from the school."

A door chime announced the presence of another customer, preventing further conversation. Hopper laid a hand on El's shoulder and steered her in the direction of the school supplies. Eleven was acutely aware of the fact that she was still being watched, even in the store. She tried to focus on not getting angry at the intrusion and accidentally upending any displays. "I know kid," Hopper told her sympathetically, "hopefully the novelty will wear off soon. Let's look at your list, ok?"

She nodded silently and concentrated on the task at hand, dutifully collecting the requisite number of each supply and adding it to the plastic basket Hopper held out for her. And even though it was not technically on the list, she selected a Trapper Keeper with a pleasant yet cartoonish landscape on the cover and added it to the basket banking on Hopper being too distracted to tell her no. She'd seen commercials for them and felt that they were clearly such an essential item, it must have been an oversight for the school to not include one on her list.

The other customer left the store making it possible for Hopper and Mrs Byers to resume their conversation. Eleven seized on the opportunity and wandered away to explore the rest of the store. In the nearly two years she'd lived with him, Hopper had only ever bought plain white soap. Had anyone asked her opinion prior to that moment, she wouldn't have cared one way or the other. But when confronted with a selection of soaps so varied that they took up multiple shelves, there was no going back. Eleven popped the lids off each bottle for a test sniff until she found one she liked the best and brought it to Hopper.

"What is it, kid?" he asked her after she appeared at his side tapping his arm impatiently with the plastic bottle to get his attention.

"This kind smells better than yours," she told him bluntly.

"Soap should smell like soap, not like a brothel," he told her, clearly

having put no advance thought whatsoever into the statement.

"Hop!" Joyce reprimanded seconds before El asked him, "What's a brothel?"

"Don't look at me," Joyce told him unsympathetically when the oh shit look took over his face, "you walked right into that one."

"Forget I ever said that," he told her, "and I'll get you your damn soap."

Eleven nodded her agreement if only to get the pretty smelling soap, but she made a mental note to look up the word later because any word that made Mrs. Byers fuss at Hopper that way had to be interesting. Hopper said a lot of words that he wanted her to forget, some of which weren't even in the dictionary and she had to ask Mike about them.

Mrs Byers started ringing up Hopper's purchases as two new customers entered the store. Joyce thought Donald ought to pay Eleven a commission because his store hadn't been this busy all week.

"Why don't you come by for dinner?" Joyce offered in a loud enough to be overheard voice as she pushed the shopping bags across the counter. "Will and his friends will be there and it will give El a chance to meet some of her classmates before school starts."

Eleven was reminded of why she loved Mrs Byers.

"Yeah, of course. Thanks," Hopper replied before walking out of the store.

The late summer sun was slightly blinding as she stepped outside and her eyes adjusted to the change in light. "That seems like enough for one day. Ready to head home?"

"Very ready," Eleven said emphatically, "but tomorrow, I could try again. With the boys. Since I can meet them tonight."

When Hopper didn't immediately agree, Eleven reminded him, "You said-"

"Yeah, yeah, I know what I said. Fine, you can do something with the boys tomorrow."

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"Just so you know," Keith told Lucas in a nasally tone laced with unjustified superiority, "someone beat your high score on Dragon Slayer." The boys were, unsurprisingly, spending the final days of summer basking in the artificial neon light of the arcade. Dustin had spent the last of his birthday money regaining control of Dig Dug so hearing that Lucas had been unseated was doubly satisfying.

"Well at least we know it couldn't have been you," Lucas teased Dustin as they crowded around the Dragon Slayer screen waiting for the display of high scorers to come up.

"Whatever, dude," Dustin retorted weakly.

It took a moment for the boys to register the first place name but as soon as the meaning sank in, all four of them started looking around them like a family of merecats until Lucas spotted the redhead in question. "Seriously? This is how you tell us you're back?"

"You know me," Max shrugged, "I'm all about being subtle."

Lucas held out his arms in silent invitation and Max hungrily accepted the hug.

"So?" She said breaking the post-PDA awkward silence, "What did I miss?"

"Let's get out of here," Mike told her as he started walking towards the door, "we'll explain on the way."

"On the way where?" Max called after him.

"We'll explain that too," Will told her.



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"Well, holy shit!" Max exclaimed walking her bike up to the Byers' gravel driveway to find Eleven sitting on the front porch lazily rocking the aging porch swing, "Look at you outside in broad daylight and everything!"

"Missed you," Eleven told Max, pulling her into a hug.

"Missed you, too," Max hugged her back, genuinely appreciating her one and only girl friend. "It sucked not even being able to ask for updates. Do you *actually* think someone would have read our mail?"

"Yes, I do," Hopper told her as he walked out onto the porch announcing the fact that he'd been listening to their conversation. "And watch what you say on the phone," he added gruffly, "they were tapping the whole town at one point."

"Can we go for a walk?" Eleven asked, changing the conversation. Hopper considered the normalcy of the request and realized that for once, he could actually say yes.

"Yeah, sure. Be back in an hour."

"I swear one day, you guys are going to actually miss all this cloak and dagger stuff," Max teased as they walked away into the woods in the general direction of Castle Byers.

"Not me," Will declared, "I like things being back normal. Well," he amended looking at Eleven, "relatively normal anyway."

"Not to rain on your parade or anything," Max started, "but from what you guys told me on the way over here, do you really think things are going to stay normal?"

"I'll settle for not having to worry about the end of the world until we're at least out of high school," Dustin said.

"This is where I found you," El told Will quietly as Castle Byers came into view.

"Yeah," Will shuddered slightly. The clubhouse held such a mixture of good and bad memories for him. "It's actually kind of a peaceful place to hide out. In the the Right Side Up, anyway."

"At least El doesn't have to hide anymore," Mike was as happy about reaching this milestone as Eleven herself. "How was your first day out in public?"

"People stared," she responded resentfully and she added more brightly, "Hopper said I have to meet you first, but then we can do things."

"Well ok then," Mike said practically, "Hi, I'm Mike, short for Michael. Nice to meet you, wanna check out the arcade tomorrow since you're new to Hawkins?"

"Hi, I'm El, short for...oh crap, I forgot."

"Elizabeth," he prompted.

"Oh my God," Max interrupted, "Don't introduce yourself to people that way. Normal people don't tell everyone what their name is short for."

"Mike did," El countered.

"Like she said," Dustin chimed in, unable to resist the opportunity for a dig, "normal people don't tell everyone what their name is short for."

"Hey!" Mike feigned offense.

"Just tell people your name is El," Max instructed, "If Jane happens to come up, then you tell them you go by your middle name. Most people won't ask."

Max was El's best source of information for what constituted normal teenage girl behavior, so she took the advice as Gospel.

"Did you get your class schedule?" Lucas asked Max hopeful that they would have as many classes as possible together.

"No," she responded with unrestrained annoyance. "Mysteriously, my schedule is no where to be found. I have a pretty good guess for what happened to it."

"Neil or Billy?" Lucas asked, Max's usual suspects list was short.

"Same difference, really, but it would have to have been Neil. No one else is allowed to get the mail. No big deal," she brushed it off refusing to put herself back in the middle of an unwinnable power struggle, "I'll just go into the school tomorrow, tell them mine got lost in the mail and get another copy."

All of the kids had to live with bullying from one source or another, only Eleven and Max had to accept it from a parent figure.

"Now I'm glad I pushed him today," Eleven told her friend in solidarity.

"Did you really?" Max brightened and Eleven nodded.

"Last time she almost knocked him out with a tree branch," Will said with vicarious pride.

Dustin laughed. "I'm so glad you're on our side!"

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Hopper and Eleven were the last to leave the Byers' after dinner that night. It was late enough that Eleven almost dozed off on the ride home and stumbled clumsily up the steps to the front door.

"Hey, kid," Hopper called to her after she'd gotten herself ready for bed. His voice sounded more weary than he likely intended, "I need to talk to you about something and stop making that panicked face every time I tell you that. If I ever need to break bad news to you, I'll

lead with it, ok? Just, sit down for a minute."

"What?" she huffed at him. He waited for her to sit first. The trailer by the lake was hardly a large home, but it was quite a bit larger than the cabin. Though further apart, the living room still contained a sofa and an adjacent chair. Hopper and Eleven assumed their Serious Conversation places, he in the arm chair, her on the recently replaced sofa.

"Alright," Hopper told her, stalling and looking for the words he wanted. "We have a lot of changes coming up so throwing one more at you probably isn't the best timing on my part, but it is what it is."

"What is what what is?" Eleven perched on the edge of the sofa impatient with his vagueness.

"Joyce and I are maybe dating," he finally blurted out.

"*Finally*," Eleven flopped backwards, throwing out her arms in a mixture of relief and exasperation.

"Excuse me?"

"We know," she told him, annoyed by his obliviousness, "We *all* know. We've been waiting on you and Mrs Byers to figure it out."

"Wait a minute," Hopper stopped her, now also annoyed, "who's 'we'?"

"Everyone."

"This is not a topic of conversation for you and your friends," Hopper was using the stern voice to which Eleven was now totally immune in a doomed attempt to regain control over the situation.

"Wait, what do you mean '*maybe*'?" Eleven was just registering the qualifier to Hopper's announcement.

Hopper rubbed his face and made the noise that was halfway between a groan and a growl. "Look," he said finally, "Joyce and me, we've known each other a long time."

"I know. Since high school."

"Since before high school, actually. Some of that time we've been friends and some not."

"And sometimes more," Eleven reminded him because that was the part she really cared about.

"Yeah, ok, that too," he conceded, "But we have a tendency to irritate each other and get into arguments—"

"— So? We irritate each other and get into arguments."

"You and me are a different deal altogether, kid. Neither of us wants to risk losing the friendship so we don't want to push it. Sometimes you've just gotta take time to see how things go."

"Max hates her step brother, but I already like Will and Jonathan," Eleven mused utterly dismissing Hopper's desire to proceed with caution. Eleven knew better than anyone how Hopper was resistant to change on principle and looked for any excuse to justify it.

"Alright, just hold on there, kid. Stop. No one's getting married."

"Ever?" She challenged him, humor in her eyes.

"Alright, you know what?," Hopper's patience for her teasing was officially exhausted, "It's late. You're tired. Go to bed."

"I'm not tired anymore."

"I don't care."

"Can we get one house for everyone?" She continued as though he hadn't said anything.

"Go. To. Bed."

"Because that would be nice."

"I'm going to start throwing away the Eggos in about ten seconds," he warned.

"No you won't." El brazenly called his bluff.

"Yeah? Try me."

"Fine. Going to bed," she figured she'd pushed him far enough for one night, "Goodnight."

"Night, kid."

Eleven walked away from the living room towards her bedroom, stopped and taunted Hopper one last time for good measure. "We could live closer to Mike."

"So help me El, I'm walking into the kitchen!"

"Ok! ok!" she surrendered, "I'm going!"

Eleven wasn't exactly lying when she'd told Hopper that she was no longer tired. Her body was tired, her eyes were heavy, but her mind was replaying pieces of her day over and over, piecing it together, making sense of it all. And then suddenly she realized what it was that felt simultaneously strange and comfortable: *This must be what normal felt like. This was everything she never would have known she was missing had Brenner been successful in keeping her brainwashed. This was it was to have friends. To have family. To finally, finally be home.*

Motivated by a need stronger than sleep and more comfortable than her warm bed, she opened her bedroom door and heard the evening news. It was now quite late, but Hopper was still awake. Eleven walked down the short hallway to the living room, burrowed herself into Hopper's side and wordlessly wrapped his arm around her like a blanket.

"Can't sleep?" He asked her reconsidering the wisdom of dropping a bombshell right before he expected her to go to bed.

Rather than answer, she pushed herself into his lap, wrapped his second arm around her and pressed her head into his chest. "You did good," she told him as she let sleep take her, "you did so good."